

THE FANGS OF THE SERPENT

GEORGE R. FOX





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THE FANGS OF THE SERPENT

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BY
GEORGE R. FOX ✓
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THE FANGS OF THE SERPENT

CHAPTER I.

THE SUMMONS.

COME with me, sir—the master—I beg your pardon—but——”

At the sound of this voice at my back, I wheeled and faced the speaker. He was an old man, bare-headed, and in the livery of a butler. His face was white and drawn save for two red spots on each cheek just beneath the eyes. The result of great excitement, I thought; or might it not come from exertion, for he was panting and blowing as though he had run for some distance.

“Oh, sir,” he gasped as he tried to control his laboring lungs, “he is serious. Come with me, please,” and he laid a hand on my sleeve as he turned to lead me away.

In the great city of Chicago one does not lightly follow an unknown to an unknown destination for an unknown purpose. A sobbing girl has led many an unwary man to a rendezvous with criminal associates who rob, and sometimes murder him. An agonized cry for “Help” has called more than one kindhearted

rescuer to financial loss. Almost has it come that in the Windy City, the cynical citizen will calmly walk away while murder is being done. It is not his business—and it may be a trap.

Yet I did not hesitate. As the man started forward, I followed. In the first place, a reporter never has enough in his pockets very much to mind if it is stolen or not. In the second place, anyone who follows that game for the years I have been in it, should read at a flash a character as transparent as that of the old man before me.

“Take a chance, Larry, me boy,” I remarked to myself. “Maybe—it may be you’ve stumbled on something worth while.” But I could not know how big it was going to be.

As these thoughts ran through my head, the butler was hurrying before me, back over the way he must have come to have overtaken me. I realized now that I had misjudged him when I thought his shortness of breath was due to running. The old man was no sprinter; he hobbled along now in a way that again forced his lungs to labor anew. His lameness it was, aided perhaps by age, that shortened his breathing to gasps.

He did not go far back along the street before he turned in at the gate of a pretentious house with a brownstone front. It was a grim, gloomy pile, in years long past its prime. When one of these old castles gets run down, it takes on the appearance of a prim old maid who is careless of her appearance.

As we reached the steps, the old man had recourse to the hand-rail to assist his halting limbs as he climbed; even then he moved so slowly that I had time to study

him more closely. I judged that he was about sixty years of age. He was very bald, with a clean-shaven face. Despite his efforts in hurrying up the steps, he was erect and as straight as a ramrod. His uniform was not old; neither had it an appearance of newness. He wore it as one long accustomed to such accoutrements.

At the door, which apparently in his haste he had left open, he stepped aside with a courtly grace that I might enter first. I did.

It isn't the thing to do in Chicago, to let a strange man send you first into an unknown house. Yet I did it; for the house was no longer unknown. While I had been deeply buried in thought as I hastened along through the crisp fall breeze, and had given little or no attention to the residences I was passing, I had by now recognized the building. It was the old home mansion of J. Marion Oswald.

Everyone knows J. Marion Oswald. Even if he were not reputed the owner of forty millions, the times without number that he has been investigated, and the countless other times threatened with prison, would make his name a household word wherever the press penetrates. And through investigation and threat he continued calmly to pile millions on top of more millions.

He isn't one of our selfmade men, either. L. Henry Oswald left his son some millions, no one ever knew just how many. These in turn had been handed down from his father, plain old John Oswald who got his first million together selling pork to the Union Army in the days of '61.

By his "the master is serious," the butler must have

meant J. Marion was ill or in difficulties. Then to call in a reporter—when old J. Marion hated them so cordially. So I had not hesitated to step before the strange butler into the great hall. In some of the districts of the city—with brownstone fronts, too—he might have been using his uniform as a stall; but not here. “No,” half consciously flitted through my mind while I was yet considering what might be the matter with the millionaire. “He won’t use a blackjack on my skull.” We all abuse the millionaire as a thief and worse, but we trust to the air of respectability which surrounds him.

As I entered the butler closed the door and stepped before me. “Follow me, please,” he requested, the habit of years still sitting upon his shoulders though it was plainly evident that he was pitifully disturbed. Down the broad passage he led, and up the great staircase which sprang into the air at the end of the hall.

Up the first flight without a pause, save as he labored from step to step. No halting on the landing of the second floor; up and up; he no longer panted, but the muscles of his back twitched with every step. He was lifting each foot by an individual effort of will. Nor was there pause at the third floor. Up, still up; and slowly.

The stairway swept round and round in a great circular soaring and I began to wonder. I’d seen the house a hundred times, but I’d never noticed. How many stories were there in the Oswald building? Had they, unnoticed, modernized it to a twenty-story limit? If so, why hadn’t they put in elevators? Then we reached the last landing, on what I would have called

the attic floor. The butler paused before the single door opening to the left out of a small square hall.

It seemed strange that this door should be closed when the street door had been open; but closed it was. An alert sense of hesitation, self-preservation, perhaps, made me pause. But again the consciousness of being in the home of J. Marion Oswald reassured me. As the butler opened the door I passed in before him.

"There he is, sir." His tone was low; there was no need for him to point. "Do what you can for him, doctor."

Just before the door, and to the right, upon the floor lay the long form of J. Marion Oswald himself. Near his feet stood two girls; a single glance revealed them as servants. At his head, and supporting it, knelt a woman whom I judged to be in about her thirty-fifth year. Of course I know better now, but then, perhaps because of the lines of worry on her face, and because of her position, I took her to be much older than she really was.

She had pillowed his head on one arm as she knelt above him, and in the hand of the other she held a glass of some liquid, which I took for water; there was a haggard, drawn look about her mouth, but there were no other signs of nervousness nor were there marks of tears.

As she heard the butler speak she looked up and catching sight of me set the glass down on the floor. "We found him like this. And we've tried everything we know for a fainting spell, but he does not regain his senses. Help him, doctor."

Now I'm no doctor. My profession is journalism, and perhaps I should have confessed at once. But I

did not. Besides, perhaps there was something I could do, for I have a not inconsiderable knowledge of medicine gathered in the rough and tumble life of my vocation. Then too, I could see that if anything were to be done, there was need of haste; and if a physician was summoned, it might be too late when he arrived; first aid might render him assistance.

There was a more unlovely side to my desire to remain. Back of it was the impetus of a life's training. Here was the great J. Marion Oswald, who had over and over refused to be interviewed, whose dislike for newspaper men gave rise to the oft-quoted, "Loves as Oswald loves a reporter," brought low in his own house. Sickness, accident, possibly death, for I could not judge which from the single glance I had taken, happening to a man of his standing and I, a news-writer withdrawing, would never be forgiven nor my offense forgotten by my sheet nor the whole press. Every instinct of training bade me remain; a few faint qualms of decency tried to gain the upper hand and force me to confess, then go; but they were stifled almost before they were born.

The reason I had been taken for a doctor was self-evident. I had been well bundled up, for November winds in Chicago are chill. In my hand I carried a case almost identical to a physician's. 'Tis true it held only my cornet. A man of medicine of today cannot be told by his dress, though we still retain the impression that he can. So the butler, had he been the one first to catch sight of me, had taken the case as a sign manual of my business. It was "Come, doctor," with him and naturally the lady had assumed he had secured the assistance sent for.

I knelt beside the still form. Almost as an instinct, having seen doctors do it hundreds of times, I reached for his wrist and pulse. Not the shade of a beat could I detect; nor was there movement in the great artery of the neck. I noticed, too, that his flesh was not warm, though neither had it the chill of death. As I raised his arm I was surprised to detect a stiffness. It could not be rigor mortis, I argued, for even though he were dead, surely they had found him shortly after the seizure, whatever it was.

His eyelids were nearly closed and as I raised one expecting to encounter a glassy stare, I received a distinct shock. The ball was clear and bright, but moved not in the slightest. Yet I could have sworn that there was the light of reason in the eye, almost as though he understood and would speak, yet could not. So startling was the look of this single eye that I raised the other lid. The ball presented the same appearance. Yet as I gazed the first impression passed. The eyes faded, grew dull, were dead and lifeless.

Yet so strongly was I impressed that I lit a match and held it close to the eye, as though to singe it; not a twitch of the lid, not a movement, not a change rewarded my efforts.

“Oh, doctor, what is the matter; what has happened to him?” and the woman who held his head turned appealing eyes to mine. But without waiting for me to speak she bent over him and called in the sweetest voice I have ever heard, “Father, father.”

Then I recognized what I should have known at first; this was J. Marion Oswald’s only child, his daughter Isobel. I was familiar with her features in a general way, having seen many a picture of her in

Sunday supplements, and had caught glimpses of her at the Charity Ball and other social divertissements; in those and at those functions, she did not look at all as she did when I entered. In the pictures she appeared almost superhuman; at the affairs she looked the child of eighteen; now, she was a woman.

Worn and troubled, her eyes were drawn in anguish, yet her voice, I hear it singing in my dreams. "Father, father." Music such as that would call me back from the grave. Were he only sleeping, were he unconscious, surely he would hear and would answer.

He did not. I was convinced that for J. Marion Oswald the last earthly call had sounded. To me, he was no longer in the land of the living. Yet who was I to say. True, I have seen about as many corpses in my life as the average physician will in an entire life in practice. For years I had covered the morgue; and not for nothing have I been at every great accident within two hundred miles of Chicago, in the last few years. He was dead. I knew it. But—it was not for me to say.

Yet, partly from a desire to help and partly for the sake of the news, I had posed as a doctor. Now to extricate myself.

"Miss Oswald," and I rose and stepped around the still form until I reached her side. Gently taking the head from her arm I laid it on the floor, then raised her to her feet. I tried to break it gently. Somehow, death is a big thing, bigger than any of us. "Miss Oswald, bear up; I'm afraid——" and I needed to say no more.

"But let me suggest that you send for Dr. Alec Thompson at once. He is a specialist in paralysis and

while I greatly fear there is no aid he can render your father, there is yet the chance."

That butler was a jewel. He had stood just inside the door while I had made the examination and now, without a word from me or from his mistress, he hurried out and I heard him going haltingly down the stairs. He was on his way to send for Dr. Thompson.

If he got Thompson, and I was sure he would, as the doctor would not yet have left his office, I was all right. Alec Thompson and I had been on many a trip together when he was ambulance surgeon in the days before he began to specialize. My coming in would be satisfactorily explained; there had been no intrusion on my part; I was asked to come, and so had a very good right to be there. Besides, he knew that I was capable of rendering first aid, and my staying would thus be accounted for.

Miss Oswald had not taken my message in a hysterical manner. The call for the specialist had not seemed to penetrate her understanding, yet she grasped, for she must have feared it, that her father was gone. With a sobbing, "Father, father," she turned from me to look down into the still face. Then the tears came and turning again she came into my arms.

Doubtless she did not see where she was going, yet even in that first hour I dream that she knew and felt a kindred soul. It was but an instant that I held her before I passed her on to the maids; but in that moment I changed. Since then life has never been the same.

The two maids were sensible women, though neither was any older than her mistress. Between them they led her away to the lower floor. I was alone with J. Marion Oswald.

There was no reason that I could see why the body should not be removed and placed on a bed; but the butler was still phoning for Dr. Thompson; the maids were with the daughter and there was no one to help move him. I stood guard over all that was left of the house of a great spirit, all that remained of his pomp, the only symbol of the power that had shaken men.

He lay on a rug, but was uncovered. I glanced about for something to place over him. Nothing came to view save a great Flemish tapestry illustrating the Field of the Cloth of God, which hung on the wall beyond the doorway. This I hastily jerked down, adding, I am afraid, a few more rents to those it already contained. With this priceless old relic I covered the remains of a man who had beaten down others that he might rise, yet who was himself now as low as the lowest.

By the time this had been accomplished the butler had again crept up the stairs to tell me that he had reached Dr. Thompson and that the doctor would be with us as soon as his car could bring him. As I noticed the limp of the butler and his apparent age, I decided not to suggest moving the body but to leave it as it was for the doctor's inspection. I have seen too many bodies to feel the slightest touch of chill at so close contact with death, but I was a stranger in the house and thought best to request the butler to remain with me until the Doctor came.

As we waited I had time to study my surroundings. I had realized long ere this in what room we were but until that moment there had been no chance to survey it.

Of course everyone has heard of the great collections in archeology of J. Marion Oswald. With the wealth

at his command, and with collecting as a hobby, no museum in America contained a greater wealth of the antique, the odd and the unusual, mostly prehistoric, than did the collection of him who lay dead and covered by one of his trophies.

It was said, and the Sunday sheets play it up whenever other news is scarce, that he maintained two complete excavating expeditions by the year; that never was there a new find in the canyons of the southwest, in the jungles of Sumatra, on the cliffs of Incaland, or elsewhere, but that, if it was of a nature involving the races that dwelt in the dim past ere recorded history was born, the agents of J. Marion Oswald were there, lifting the cream of each discovery for the private enjoyment of the millionaire collector.

As we guarded all that was mortal of the man, all about I saw the results of his work. For the entire top floor of his home was given over to museum purposes. Aside from the boxlike hall at the head of the stairs, the floor was in one large room. The old house must have been a mammoth, for this single apartment exceeded in size many a ballroom I've been in.

All about it, in cases and out, yet in some semblance of order, were scattered the gems which many a collector coveted; and if rumor had it aright, some did far more than covet.

The tapestry I had so unceremoniously removed from its hanging-place seemed out of place among the bowls, axes, tools, spears, figured statuettes from Siam and from Central America, stone images small and perfect from Assyria, books of clay from the same place, and books from Yucatan on the fiber that bore the painted glyphs.

In all that collection was no article that was common. To find a place in the museum J. Marion Oswald had formed, each must be unique.

I had not known Mr. Oswald. I experienced no particular emotion now that he was gone, and as the opportunity to inspect his treasures was one that might never offer again, I walked slowly about among the cases. But with the butler was the feeling of loss and the instinctive dislike to remain near the body, although it was but a covered heap on the floor. Keeping a respectful distance in the rear, he followed me as I viewed the relics.

A suit of badly rusted and decayed armor attracted my attention. Many parts were missing I noted as I stopped and looked at it more closely. Yet from what remained I readily made out that it was not unlike those of English make. As the butler saw that I was interested he sidled up, and with an occasional glance at the form hidden by the tapestry explained.

"The master got that many years ago." His voice was hushed and his eyes sparkled with tears, but he stood straight. "It was found in the New England States, somewhere. I am told, sir, as how a poet wrote a piece about it."

"H-m-m," I remarked. "'The Skeleton in Armor.' Yes."

He assented. So, J. Marion Oswald, too, was to be added to the list of those American collectors who possessed among their collections works far from genuine.

As I turned away from the armor, a huge, brass-bound chest caught my eye. It stood opposite the armor and at the rear of the entrance hall, just where,

if the walls of the entry were removed, would be "the head of the stairs." It was on the wall just behind the chest that the tapestry had hung. This brass-stripped monstrosity, too, seemed out of place. It looked too modern; and besides, it was of such size that it would make a truckload of itself. And it was rather heavy, as I found when I lifted one end.

The butler was ready with an explanation. "That the master had sent him last month. I heard him tell Miss Oswald that it was found in a cave in Peru with a lot of Inca remains."

That would account for his having it. It was a find that would be the subject of dispute for years to come. Did the Incas make it? or did they get it from the Spaniards? or had it come to America long before the crews of Columbus were persuaded to push out of the harbor on their great journey?

Anyone who has ever read the pamphlets that J. Marion Oswald was wont to publish more than semi-occasionally will understand what such a discovery meant to one like him who delighted in expressing the most bizarre theories concerning the peopling of the Western World.

A sheaf of spears hung across from the chest and a little down the room. The beautiful workmanship of the copper tips attracted my attention but I no sooner made as though to grasp them than the butler protested.

"Oh, no, sir. Don't dare to touch them. Not as you would harm them; oh, no, sir, but the master won't let us servants dust them or anything. He said they are poisoned."

I am little frightened by anything of that kind; I

reasoned that if they were antiques and had ever been coated with a toxic substance, its virulence would long ere this have departed. But as I saw that the old man was nervous while I remained near them, I strolled up to a mounted group that stood beyond.

It represented a scene from the Pueblo country and showed what I took to be a part of the Hopi snake dance ceremonies. The Indians were grouped in natural postures, while the rattlesnakes looked as though they were alive. Whoever did the work, it was a mighty fine example of modern museum mounting. But unlike those in other institutions, it was not glass-enclosed.

I did not understand just why it was among Mr. Oswald's collections until, some time later, I read his treatise on this dance and the proof he tried to adduce that the Hopis, because of the snake festival, were direct descendants of worshipers of Siva and came from India.

It was purely a matter of luck that I had penetrated into this museum. So far as I know, no newspaper man had ever before got this far into the home of J. Marion Oswald. Ever since the government had had him on the stand in the rebate cases of '96, and the newspapers had pounced on and played up the one slip he made at that inquiry, he had refused absolutely to see any representative of the press. Under the situation, I made the most of my chance. Here was material enough for a dozen special articles. Yet I was not minded to use it. If I could have got in while the owner lived and with his permission——

Now he lay stretched out in the middle of it all; oblivious to the marvels he had gathered; oblivious to

the fact that an heir of the fourth estate was taking it all in.

From far down in the lower region of the house, a tiny tinkle floated up to us. Punctilious, the butler made for the stairs. But before he had descended farther than the third landing, I heard voices and the light tread of feet on the second flight; I recognized Dr. Thompson's deep bass. The maid was bringing him up.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLUTTERING FRAGMENT.

I MET Dr. Thompson at the door. The butler was with him, the maid having returned to a lower floor. As I greeted him he recognized me with surprise. "How does it happen you are here?" he inquired.

I explained the error of the butler in taking me for a doctor; how I, spurred on by my news sense, had followed him blindly, not knowing to what he summoned me; how, as I entered the room I saw the need for a doctor and as I did have some medical knowledge, had made an examination; this had led me to believe that J. Marion Oswald was dead.

But I could not be certain. Cataleptic conditions simulate death; and there might be other trance-like states which were too close to the border for me to determine. This explanation took but a few seconds. As I finished Dr. Thompson nodded and stepped over to the body.

"You are right," he said after the briefest of scrutinies. "He is dead."

But in the case of a millionaire one may not lightly utter a pronunciamiento; one must know. In the matter of a poor unfortunate found stiffened out in O'Leary's Place, I have seen Thompson—and many another doctor, too—give the broken body a hurried glance, a light touch on the wrist, and summon the undertaker.

Not in the present problem, though. Dr. Thompson made the most thorough examination I have ever seen attempted. He made every test of which I ever heard and many more that were new to me. When, at last, he rose, I knew that he knew; the man was dead or he was not. He but verified his first statement. "He's dead," bluntly. That settled it.

In one way it did and in another it did not. When I came to cause, I ran upon an unsuspected snag.

"A stroke, wasn't it?" I inquired as he stood putting his instruments into his case. It seemed most probable to me that this was the seizure which had resulted in death. With a serious face the doctor turned to me.

"No," and there was no levity in his eyes. "Friend Larry, you are concerned in a very serious matter. J. Marion Oswald died of poison."

"Poison!" My thought raced. One of the great ones of earth! And I, not yet in touch with my paper. Yet it was a shock, too. I admit that to be called in from the street and to impersonate a doctor, examining an unconscious man and pronouncing him dead, then to have "poisoned" introduced, and to know that the victim was very wealthy, was food for serious apprehension. After I had taken a moment to consider, I could not see how I was in any way implicated. By his bald statement Alec did not mean that I was directly concerned but rather that at first hand I was receiving my impressions. The newswriter surged back and submerged the individual.

"Poison, Doc! You sure?" Facts, facts, I must have.

"There is little doubt of it. His death is the result of the administration of some poison which acts in a

paralyzing manner upon the nerves. That is as much as I would care to say without making an autopsy."

"How was he poisoned? Did he do it himself?"

If he did, there would be no necessity for leaving the body where it now lay; we might as well carry it down to a sleeping chamber from whence later, it would be borne to its last resting place.

Dr. Thompson shook his head in answer to my last question.

"That is not for me to say. But I will say to you that I do not believe it was self-administered."

Doubtless this was true. J. Marion Oswald had too much to live for to think of hurrying himself into the world beyond, though that could not long have been put off, as he was in his seventies. No, old men do not usually poison themselves, especially when they enjoy the best the world can give and have a hobby to ride.

The butler, standing behind me, had heard all that had been said. "Oh, doctor," his voice was almost a sob, "it can't be—it can't be. What will Miss Isobel think?"

I have watched many a soul in many a heart-breaking situation, but I never saw a man in grief stand as straight as that old butler stood.

His hands were as though glued to his sides, but his face worked; it writhed, it twisted; the anguish of his soul was reflected in every movement of his lineaments. Butlers trained to immobility?—Possibly so for ordinary occasions but put them into a trying situation and then see.

I wondered at his sorrow. J. Marion Oswald, by reputation at least, was not a lovable character. Yet,

unloved and unloving, he might have inspired in the heart of the old servant a genuine affection for his master.

"Yes," and Dr. Thompson motioned me to lead the butler to the far side of the body, "that it is. Understand, I make no definite statement as to the cause, but poisoning there is." As the old man and I walked around the still form, Alec added, "As it is poison, the coroner must be sent for; until he comes, remain here but disturb nothing," and he went down to telephone for the state's official.

When Coroner Hoffman arrived, he was accompanied by the police surgeon, two officers in uniform, and a man in plain clothes whom I knew well, Abe Sullivan of the detective bureau. Abe and I have been together on many a queer happening. As he caught sight of me a question sprang into his eyes, but he did not voice it at this time. He greeted me as cordially as circumstances would permit.

The surgeon was the only member of the party who appeared to have work to do. The two officers came to rest against the wall beside the doorway; the coroner found a seat in one of the few chairs in the room and Sullivan strolled leisurely about the floor.

The medical officer questioned Dr. Thompson as to the steps taken, and being informed, requested him to assist in a second investigation. The two went carefully over the still form. Every test Alec had made the other repeated. They were slow and deliberate in their work. I did not know how much Thompson had told over the phone, but it must have been enough to wake them up. They recognized the importance of thoroughness and accuracy.

At last they were done and I heaved a sigh as they arose. The coroner stood up and the doctors faced him.

"Well, Dr. Templeton," and Hoffman stood waiting.

There was a frown on the surgeon's face and a puzzled look about his eyes, but his words gave no indication of such thoughts.

"The man died three hours ago of poison."

"How administered?"

"We have not yet determined." He paused and the wrinkles of puzzlement became deeper as he added, "We cannot make out the nature of the poison. It acts in a much different manner from any with which we are familiar."

The lights had been turned on before the coroner and his associates arrived and that official now selected a chair with a broad arm, there being no table in the room; sinking into it, he drew out a record book and a fountain-pen and jotted down our names and addresses. This accomplished he began asking questions.

"It was you who phoned us about this case," he inquired of Dr. Thompson.

"Yes."

"Who called you in?"

"A phone call which I have since learned was sent by the butler."

The coroner looked at the old servant.

"You called in Dr. Thompson? Is he the family doctor?"

"No, sir, he isn't. But this doctor," and he indicated me, "told me to get Dr. Thompson as was a specialist. But please, sir, can't we take master away? I can't bear to see him lying there."

"In just a few moments." The coroner was sympathetic, understanding the motive which prompted the request. I noticed that Abe Sullivan was standing just back of the coroner's chair, seemingly studying the pattern of the ceiling. I knew better. He was watching our features; not a move nor an expression would escape him. Hoffman now addressed me.

"Well, sir, who are you?"

"Larry Bowen of the staff of the American News. You will remember me as the one who brought you the green bottle in the case of the headless chorus girls."

"Oh, yes,"—he nodded—"now I recall you, though I haven't seen you in such a long time that you have almost slipped out of my mind. But what are you doing here? Did I understand aright that the butler called you, 'Doctor'?"

I explained. As I began the butler, who had not caught all I told Dr. Hoffman when the latter came up, drew himself up, and his face became frigid. Even a butler can feel offended at such a deception. But after I had made the full statement, and he understood how circumstances had forced me to act as I did, I saw his face soften from its forbidding and stern lines.

"Who was in the room when you got here?" the coroner then wanted to know.

"Miss Oswald and the two maids. The butler followed me in."

I was then requested to explain in exactly what position the body lay when I first saw it, what each one present was doing, and just what was done later. I described the scene as well as I was able.

"Who was with him when he was seized with the attack?" I noticed that the coroner used this term in

preference to "poisoned." It sounds much better, especially in the case of one as great as Mr. Oswald.

I didn't know. Further, I had not thought of asking. The butler spoke up.

"Mr. Oswald was alone, sir. Immediately after lunch, he came up here by himself. I heard him tell Miss Oswald he wanted to study a while. It was his daughter who found him when she went up a little later."

So it was the daughter, Isobel Oswald, who had been the first to come upon the form of her father. What a shock it must have been,—to leave a lower room without a thought of trouble, to trip lightly up the stairs, then come suddenly upon her dead father!

"Was the body as it is now?" was Hoffman's next question.

The butler did not know.

Who did?

Miss Oswald, to be sure. But the coroner evinced no disposition to send for her. After the nervous strain through which she had passed, she would be in no condition to be questioned. It was unthinkable that he should intrude on her grief at this time. Perhaps he, too, felt this, though I have known him to get from those most deeply grief-stricken some vital point.

Sullivan made a suggestion. Perhaps the maids, who had been with their mistress in this room, might know, he said. One of the officers was dispatched to find them and request them to favor the coroner with their presence. In a short time their steps were heard on the stairs.

As they entered the room, the coroner motioned to Sullivan to place chairs for them, which he did in such

a manner that their backs were to the body lying beneath the enshrouding tapestry.

The first maid was dark and lithe, with a great wealth of black hair. She was neatly and tastefully dressed and appeared to be about twenty-five years of age. The other was round and plump, evidently a chambermaid, or of one of the kindred occupations. Her hair was as close to red as it could get without actually hitting that color. She wore a checked dress of some cheap-looking material, and an apron of blue gingham. There was something about this second maid, while she was neither untidy nor slack, that bespoke a carelessness not noticeable in the first of the two.

The coroner first addressed the blonde.

"What is your name, please?"

"Annie O'Regan."

"Ah, yes. Miss O'Regan. Well, what do you know about your master's death?"

The girl's face grew blank and her eyes wide with terror, as she stared at her questioner. Hoffman recognized that his abrupt query had in some way been construed by her as an accusation. He set about allaying her fears.

"Do not be frightened; there is nothing to fear. We are only asking for a little information. Please tell us where you were and what you were doing when your mistress found her father."

The girl was twisting her hands in her apron but when she understood what was wanted, she answered slowly and connectedly. But she had little to reveal.

"I was helping the kitchen girl with the dishes, that being part of my work, when I heard Miss Oswald call.

It sounded queer but I didn't think much of it then. It was only a few minutes later when I heard Elsinore here," and she glanced at the other maid, "calling me to come. When I got here Mr. Oswald was stretched out on the floor with his eyes nearly shut and Miss Oswald was holding his head on her arm."

"No one else was there?"

"No, sir. Just them two. Tasker came afterwards."

"Tasker?"

"Yes, sir; the butler."

A few more questions touching on details of locations and the coroner turned to the other maid.

"Your name is Elsinore?"

"Indeed but yes, sir. Elsinore Trevecott," and her eyes met Hoffman's in a steady frank gaze. I noticed that Abe was giving this maid rather more attention than he had the other. As a judge of character, he must have felt that hers was one of the most alert intelligences in the room.

Elsinore was pretty, a beauty in a way. Yet I do not think that she knew it; or knowing it, never let it obtrude; her words and actions showed no consciousness that she was other than a well-trained maid.

"Did you come up to this floor with Miss Oswald?" As he put the question the coroner beckoned to an officer. When the latter approached, Hoffman gave him some directions in so low a tone that I did not catch what he said. The officer nodded and went quietly down the stairs. Elsinore had refrained from replying while Hoffman addressed his subordinate, but when the messenger had gone, answered at once.

"No, sir." Her voice was low and clear. "I did not

come to the museum with her. I was in her room placing garments in a drawer when I heard her call."

"You went at once?"

She nodded in a dignified manner. "I was but a floor below and though her call was not loud, there was a ring of fear, or terror, yet not either, in her voice. It is difficult to tell just how it impressed me. I dropped everything and rushed to her. When I first entered I did not see her."

Coroner Hoffman glanced at the body; then half turned and looked at the door. The working of his mind was as plainly to be followed as though he had spoken. If she could not have seen her mistress as she came in, then the body could not have been found where it now lay. For, presumably, the daughter was beside her father, and he was then stricken; else why the call? He turned to the maid; there was no need to voice the unspoken question. She passed at once to an explanation.

"Miss Oswald was just behind that wall," and she indicated the east partition of the hall; "she was down by her father, attempting to raise his head."

The large room given over to the museum was oblong, the longer direction to the north and south. The stairs reached that floor at about the middle of the west side. At their top was the small, square room with the door opening into the museum in the north wall. The east and south walls were blank.

Why anyone should build such a boxlike projection into a room, as was this hall, I couldn't see. As I now think, it was doubtless to prevent unannounced intrusions upon the owner while he was studying, though

he had built it ostensibly to shut off drafts and noises from below, as we found out later.

It was from the museum wall of this east partition indicated by the maid that I had plucked the tapestry; and it was against this wall that the huge chest stood. Of course, if Miss Oswald was on that side of the hall, Elsinore could not see her until she had entered the door and passed around to that side.

“And Mr. Oswald?” The coroner moved his chair a little farther to his right so that by turning he had an unobstructed view along the east side of the hall’s east wall.

“He lay on the floor and hunched up. His legs were twisted under him and his arms were bent down underneath his chest. His head had dropped forward and hung down. Miss Oswald was trying to raise it as I entered. If you desire that I do so, I can show you about how he lay.”

The girl was very self-possessed. It seemed a most unusual offer. Yet was it? In times of stress, most persons will tender every aid and assistance, especially if unspoiled by life in a large city. The coroner accepted her offer with thanks. Leaving her chair she stepped over to the end of the large box.

I judged from her efforts that it was a most difficult task to take the exact position in which J. Marion Oswald had lain, or even to assume one which in any way approximated it. When, at last, she did secure one that seemed to satisfy her, she retained it but a very few seconds, so cramped and constrained was the attitude she took.

From her illustrating, Mr. Oswald’s feet were doubled under him as though he had been squatting or

sitting in cross-legged fashion. Judged by appearances, when the poison struck him, he had lost control over every muscle and had sagged down into a distorted heap, his arms beneath him. He had not gone entirely to the floor.

He had dropped at the north end of the chest, in the corner between it and the wall. His head, as shown by Elsinore in her posing, was against the tapestry, though this no longer was in the place from which I had torn it. It was the top and back of his head which had touched the fabric. From watching her, I got the impression that he was in a sort of sitting position with his head drooping upon his chest, when he lost consciousness and had oozed loosely into the corner.

Elsinore, after rising, had turned again to Hoffman.

"As nearly as I can represent it, he lay as I have shown you. He was partly against this end of the chest," and she touched the north end, "and the wall. When Miss Oswald caught sight of me she called to come and assist her. We straightened her father out on the floor as you see him. I called Annie, then ran for a glass of water."

"When did the butler come in?" the coroner wanted to know.

"He must have been on the stairs when I called. He was there when I returned. He is a little lame in climbing the stairs." I noticed that the butler nodded gratefully at this. "Annie got there but a minute before him. We sent him for a doctor."

"Who did? Your mistress, you, or Annie?"

"I did, sir."

"You didn't use a phone when you had one in the house," and the coroner gave his attention to the butler,

"but rushed out on the street and accosted Mr. Bowen?" The maid sought her chair.

The butler showed his distress. Not that he moved body or limbs. He was too well trained for that; but his face paled, and the muscles twitched.

"Yes, sir—yes, sir. I was so flurried by seeing the master lying there I just ran out of the house knowing that Dr. Conkey has his office in his home just across the avenue; then I saw this man and took him for a doctor."

The coroner accepted the explanation without comment; just then the officer to whom he had spoken returned.

"Yes, sir, he's on the way," I heard him say as he took up his position by the doorway. The coroner spoke to Dr. Templeton.

"We'll move his body down to his room. Jimmy is on the way."

"Jimmy," I knew, could be none other than Jimmy Haslette, the department chemist; there was but one reason for calling him in. There was to be an autopsy and in an important case, such as this, Jimmy, an expert of the first water, would represent the coroner's department.

"No more inquiries will be made today," and he addressed us collectively. "You may go now. You will all be summoned to the inquest, when we will inquire more fully into Mr. Oswald's death. I thank you for your full and complete replies given at this time," and he nodded at us with a smile.

"His room is on the first floor?" he questioned in answer to a query from Sullivan; and the butler, to whom the remark was directed, answered that it was.

When he announced that the body might be moved, we men had all stepped forward to assist; but the coroner waved us back and told Sullivan and the two officers to lift it.

Sullivan jerked the tapestry to one side, where it lay in a heap; the officers gave it no further regard, one of them stepping squarely into it. Elsinore, swiftly yet unobtrusively, reached down and drew it back; with steady, quick-moving hands, she began to fold it while the three representatives from the police department stooped to J. Marion Oswald's form.

Sullivan took the head, one of the officers took the feet while the other placed his arms about the middle of the body. With a gentleness unlooked for in such burly types, they raised him. As they did so a bit of paper dropped, hung for a brief second just beneath the form of the dead millionaire, then fluttered to the floor.

CHAPTER III.

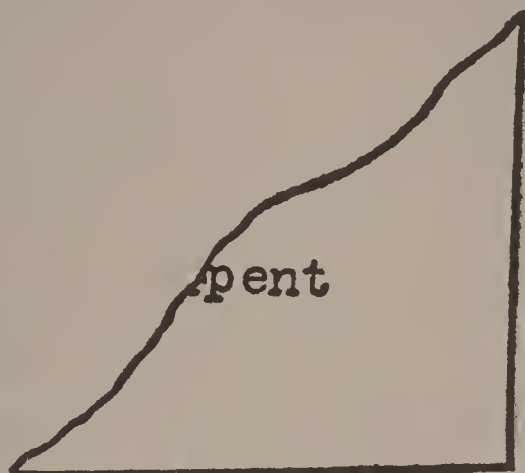
THE SCENT OF THE WOODLAND.

FROM somewhere about the garments of the dead man, that torn scrap drifted away, twisted and eddied briefly, then dropped to the boards. I had been one of the group whom the coroner had requested to step back and let the officers handle the body. But I had chanced to stand between the corpse and the wall, and could move back but a short distance. A case filled with Indian weapons prevented movement to the right, while another of stone images from Oceanica checked my withdrawing to the left.

So I chanced to be within a short step of the body as the paper dropped. It fell nearly at my feet and I stooped and picked it up. As I straightened up the coroner was already reaching out his hand to me. I placed the tiny bit in his palm, but in the brief second I had held possession of it, I had time to take one glance. That told me all the fragment had to tell.

This detached portion was the corner off a sheet, the two straight edges with the roughly torn third side forming a right-angled triangle, perhaps an inch and a half on one of the true edges, two inches on the other. The paper was a coarse, common writing paper, usually coming in notebook form in which shape any five-and-ten-cent store can supply it in thousand lots. One side was without a mark, but on the other were a few typewritten letters.

There were four that stood out clear and distinct, and there had been a letter before these, but the slip was so torn that but a tiny part of this showed. It was this:—



The letters were written by a machine using a black ribbon and the print of the typebars showed it to have been new, or nearly new. The fifth letter might have been almost any one except one of the letters having a projection at the bottom.

I do not think that the two officers noticed what had happened, but Abe did. Still, he gave but a glance as he saw me pick it up, then resolutely turned his head away. He knew that if there was anything of importance connected with it, sooner or later he would hear of it.

The body was carried below and when Jimmy arrived he, with the two surgeons, whom the coroner had requested to assist, prepared at once for the work. I later heard that Mr. Oswald's personal physician had also been sent for and that he took part. Not a word was said to anyone. In a legal sense it is probable that the permission to undertake it should have been secured from the nearest relative, especially in the case of a man of the importance of J. Marion Oswald. In

ordinary deaths where there was doubt, the coroner had full right to go ahead; but—well, it took nerve in the present situation.

By now I was a bubbling spring of the most violent emotion. Here was I, with the whole first page of my paper as my field, and I hadn't sent a word in as yet. The death of one of America's leading financiers in itself meant screaming headlines. But with J. Marion Oswald's death went the word "poison" and the mystery of how it was administered. News—I should say it was news. And I, by a stroke of luck, was in it from first to last! I've turned in some pretty beats in my time, but never a one like this.

I knew that as soon as my story began to flow in, an extra would be thrown together, for it was some hours before our main edition would be off the presses. If I could get by with it before the boys of the other sheets got wind of his death, what a sensation we should cause! As it was, it was only a miracle that three or four of the fellows had not trailed along behind the ambulance or followed Jimmy when he came. But for some reason, no one had as yet appeared.

I hung about for half an hour, long enough to find out that I could learn little more, even after the doctors finished the initial stages of their work, then ducked out, hailed a passing taxi, and was whirled to the office at top speed. I might have phoned, but—there was a chance. I should have had to use a public phone; and who knows who might have listened in? It had been done before. I did not like to ask the use of the Oswald phone because of the peculiar circumstances of my introduction to the house. I might want to feel that I was welcome there at another time; so I thought best

not to obtrude now. Had the head of the house been alive, I knew that I should not have found any mat with "Welcome" on it spread for my reception. In deference to this feeling, I decided to carry the facts to the office in person.

But I left my cornet-case. No, I did not forget it. It was left purposely. There might come a time when I would feel the need of a good excuse for calling again. It might remain for some days, or even weeks, but if this case developed as I thought it promised, I would have little use for it for some time.

As I was driven hurriedly along the avenue, I turned over in my mind just what I knew about this death, for all I had been right at hand. And that was very little.

First: J. Marion Oswald was dead. This was a matter of personal observation, corroborated by the two doctors. As in a case in court, I established my main fact first. This was a gigantic piece of news, even without the complications of how he died and why.

Second: he had been poisoned. This I had not known, but one physician had affirmed it; the other had added confirmation to the first's testimony. Wouldn't it look great in ten-inch letters across the front page, "Millionaire Dies by Poison."

Third:—there I stopped. I had not another fact directly connected with the poison death, so far as I could tell. True, according to others, he had been alone in his museum when he died. Death must have come suddenly. Was the poisoning accidental or intentional? If the latter, was it self-administered or had it been given by some enemy with the intent to kill?

It might have been suicide. After all, perhaps he had owned some unknown worry or fear that induced him to hurry into another world before his years should end in the natural manner. I didn't know of what poison he had died. It hadn't struck me before, but now I realized that when the doctor had said "poison" I had jumped to a conclusion. Suppose that instead of what I thought, he had meant one that resulted from eating a tainted food.

Shows how a fellow's mind will go racing off. Called in to see a man whom I found dead, and hearing a doctor, brought in at my suggestion, declare that he had been poisoned, I had wandered away, mentally, in the bypaths of all sorts of fanciful romances. Yet my mind is sufficiently under control, and is well enough trained, so that imaginings do not get the upper hand.

Yet, had it been a natural poison, would the doctors have been so serious? I doubted it, and again visions of revengeful men, whom J. Marion had beaten in a business deal, crawling up four-story walls and shooting poisoned darts in the window at him, filled my mind: or of a mysterious messenger from the East, where J. Marion Oswald was a money-lender not above exacting an interest that gave to the word "usury" a new meaning, sneaking quietly up the stairs, touching his hand with a poison glove, and as mysteriously slinking away.

My imagination was good; too good. In wrestling with fact, I had not the happy faculty of my old friend Cyrus Herron. He and I had been first associates in my younger days when we had worked together over the Episodes of the Supernormal. There, too, my imagination had raced ahead, without result. His did,

but only the slight distance in advance necessary to reach the correct conclusions. He had, in addition, patience and a mind for detail that could eliminate. But he wasn't here now; besides, there was nothing about this case to interest him. The psychic field was his realm.

Yet there was another matter, too; a scrap of paper bearing a few letters appeared to have fallen from J. Marion Oswald's clothes. This, in picking it up and handing it to the coroner, I had managed to scan.

There were, I realized, a thousand chances that it had no concern with the death of Oswald to one that it had. So far as I knew, it might never have been seen by him while living. It might originally have been upon the floor and when his daughter and Elsinore placed him in the position in which I first saw him, it might have become entangled in his garments. Again: it might have been dropped by some of those about him and attached itself to his coat, dropping off only when he was raised. It even might have been dropped by Sullivan or one of the other officers.

Granted that it had been seen by Mr. Oswald, there were still an enormous number of chances against its being other than a part of an ordinary missive. The letters even suggested the usual.

I turned them over in my mind: "p—e—n—t": common letters. Of what word could they be the termination? I thought over a long list but the only ones that came to me were "spent," "serpent," and "repent." "Pent" is itself a word, but the glance I had secured, which was photographed upon my brain, showed that there had been another letter before the "p."

Of these words, I felt that "spent" was undoubtedly the most likely, concerning—as it did—the life of a rich man. "Repent"; I wondered who would have nerve enough to tell old J. Marion Oswald to "repent." "Serpent" would be clearly out of place; unless it might have referred to one he was buying for his collection; or to some antique, or jewelled work, in the form of a serpent. Had I been called upon to do any betting, my money would have gone down on "spent" as by far the most likely. Then too, possibly there were a dozen other words that didn't come to me, that ended in "pent."

By this time I had reached the office; I dashed in, and things began to move.—But they did move! As I wrote the story line by line, boys kept it flowing back to the composing room. And others were digging up other matter.

Our "morgue" yielded enough material to fill a dozen issues. It wasn't what to put in; it was what to leave out. And pictures? For three Sundays we had views of J. Marion Oswald as a child, as a man, as a husband, as a father, as a widower. We ran plates of his plant, his business offices, his home, of almost everything under the sun with which he had been connected. It was a wonder we didn't run a photo of the first hog his grandfather killed.

Yet probably not one in a hundred of all the thousands who read our extra and the regular editions that followed, realized that all we had to tell was that J. Marion Oswald was dead; that the cause of his demise was poison.

The chief had kept the lines hot while I wrote, trying to find out what the doctors had discovered, what

the police were doing, what they thought, and what they were going to do. Without one single tangible result. However, we mentioned none of our efforts to get this news in the story we told; we don't often take the public into our confidence when we fall down, though we do sound our horn rather loudly when we succeed.

When the first of the extras began to roll off the presses, I started back for the Oswald home. But it was so late when I arrived that I merely had a short chat with the butler.

"Miss Oswald has retired. Yes, the family physician had been in attendance upon her. No, Dr. Thompson was not here now; he left with the other doctors. No, they didn't say anything to anyone except the coroner before they went. Yes, the undertaker had been here and had gone. Miss Annie and Miss Elsinore? Oh, they were about their work as usual."

Strange! In that great castle, the death of the mainspring, the master, had made but little difference in the life within; action had not stopped; everything was going on as usual. The daughter, the one on whom the breaking reacted most strongly, was at rest in her room. Doubtless the doctor administered a sedative. But for the rest, affairs moved forward, almost as usual. How greatly must the calm, dominating spirit of that great mind have influenced the minds of others with whom it came in contact, that they moved quietly along in their accustomed grooves even now, when the directing intelligence no longer acted; or else he had picked out faultless servants, keen, noiseless, brainy like himself.

As all the information I could reasonably expect to

gain at the house had been furnished by the butler, I did not seek to enter farther. I was not sure it was other than a simple death through poison, or I might have asked permission to revisit the museum. In hopes of finding a "clue"? A "clue"—to what, for what?

"Clues?" It makes me weary every time I hear of clues. I've watched the detectives on the city force long enough to realize in what esteem they hold "clues." Oh, certainly, they give out "clues" in most mystery cases and the press retails them by the yard. But I never saw these investigators using one. If they have a hard nut to crack, if they must find some salient fact, they assume that someone knows; and they muddle around till they find that someone. The rest is easy.

Thanking the butler for his kindness in answering my inquiries, I bade him good night and left. I decided to hunt up Alec Thompson. He was at home and had not yet retired. But he wouldn't, or couldn't, give me a hint. What tremendous power a man must have when he, dead, could influence a good friend of mine to hold his tongue and give me no information. But no, it couldn't be that.

"Doc," I came straight at him, "you said he was poisoned. Do you know the poison?"

He shook his head. "I may think I do, but I cannot be sure. Jimmy will make the official tests."

"Well, what do you *think* it is?"

"Who's inquiring,—my friend, Larry, or the press?"

Of course I couldn't urge him after that. I was on duty and any information given me, I was in duty bound to pass on to my paper. I left.

Coroner Hoffman I couldn't reach and Sullivan was off duty. There was little use seeing the officers; they

probably knew less than did I. I, too, went home and to bed.

When I took up my work again next afternoon I found on visiting the house that Abe Sullivan had been there before me. It developed that he had been sent by the coroner and as he had some time to wait, he said that he would like to see the museum. Which might be suspicious or it might not. It is just possible that he was developing the museum fever, though I never heard of his paying any particular attention to such institutions before. But perhaps I did him an injustice; he may have greatly admired the Assyrian tablets, the South American mummies, and the thousand other wonderful articles.

In the Oswald home I found that plans for the funeral were going forward. Messenger boys were coming and going, and big cars were driving up and leaving; some deposited men of position; others, apparently, sent in only regards. So much for the power of wealth to command attention, even in death.

Coroner Hoffman had impaneled a jury and had complied with the strict requirements of the law. After viewing the body, they had adjourned to a more propitious time.

That he had deemed it necessary to call together a jury meant much. In cases in which he was reasonably satisfied of the cause of the death, no such formalities were necessary; he simply announced the cause and that ended the matter. His action in the Oswald affair meant either that he didn't know, or that J. Marion Oswald was so important a personage that he was unwilling to have it rest on his word alone.

I attended the funeral. It was strictly private, yet

I felt an almost irresistible desire to be there. As a reporter I should have made it my business to get the details. But it wasn't that. I felt a restless, uneasy longing to get back to the house. It puzzled me; I couldn't account for it unless the mystery of Mr. Oswald's taking off was oppressing me.

Though the service was private, there were large numbers present; his old associates, his friends, his employees of the higher grades, filled ten large rooms. Relatives there were few; Isobel was the only near one left; two cousins and a few more distant, bore her company.

In her black gown, as she sat there so still and white, I thought she resembled a great white lily; she wore no veil. Unshrinking, she met the gaze of the many; or was it unknowing? Did she grieve so deeply that she sensed not the presence of those about? Then as her eyes chanced to meet mine, I felt that she recognized me; and my heart stirred with pity.

Many of those present were not unknown to me; financial and social Chicago had joined hands for this afternoon. There were yet others who I was certain were here at this "strictly private" affair only through curiosity. Even at a funeral of a great man, each guest cannot be asked to present credentials before being admitted. "In the presence of death, all are equal." Yes, even to being admitted to the last rites. It is assumed that he who attends is a mourner.

I was seated in an alcove which commanded a view of the brilliant divine who pronounced the eulogy. Near me were the head of Chicago's largest bank, the coroner, the Mayor's secretary, a prominent school teacher, among others. Mine was an end seat, and

beside me was a young woman in black, with a long black veil.

She looked as much like the chief mourner as did Miss Oswald. I said the woman was young, a piece of my impetuous deducing. The facts are that a form sat next me garbed in a woman's dress, with a veil so thick that I caught no glimpse of the face beneath the wide-brimmed hat. But the shape was that of a woman, one that was not far along in years, for during the services I caught a glimpse of a small and dainty foot that was surely not that of a man, nor an elderly lady.

I nearly made another rash statement. It was on my lips to add, "and she used a subtle and elusive perfume." When the scent first reached me I am not certain, for I came to realize it was an odor while my mind had drifted off into the great out of doors. I seemed to be wandering in a deep woods, riotous in color, filled with sunshine and the music of woodland folk while over all hovered the intangible air of the fall, the indescribable breath of tingling ozone.

The sense of smell is one of our most pleasing of memory senses; witness the Indian and his medicine bag. He feels, he sees, he smells the various articles therein contained; and each calls back to him a happy time of long ago. He realizes how large a part in his happiness the sense of smell played. So the faint fragrance that reached my nostrils carried me back in fancy to the woodland on my aunt's farm in Wisconsin, where as a lad I had spent many happy hours.

I had no right to assume that the perfume was one used by the young lady. It is somewhat impolite to sniff in company; even a friend might resent an at-

tempt to locate a breath of fragrance; anyway, I've never tried it. For all I knew, the big banker two seats in my rear might be the source. Still, I did assume that the young woman was responsible for the agreeable odor, just as I felt that because she wore a woman's clothes and had a woman's foot, she was a woman.

After the services we stood as the casket, followed by the relatives, was borne from the house, then passed out. The lady in black was directly before me; she carried a dainty lace creation, misnamed a handkerchief, but made no move to use it. She never touched her veil. She preceded me down the steps and out upon the street; here she turned north; I went south, and saw her no more.

I do not suppose that I would have noticed her at all, save for the heavy mourning, and for the use of the perfume,—if she did use it. As I walked, there kept recurring the pleasant days of sunny fall and late summer I had passed in woodland groves. What made up the smell I could not say. It might have been ripening fruits, grapes; or nuts; or yet flowers; any one or perhaps all three in combination.

As these thoughts came back, so too, the memory of the woman. Why was she in black? Who was she and what attracted her to the funeral of J. Marion Oswald? I finally dismissed her with the feeling that she was one of that type of neurotics to whom burial services are an entertainment, a sort of "circus."

CHAPTER IV

WHAT KILLED J. MARION OSWALD

IN conformity with the notice sent us, the adjourned meeting of inquest convened at two o'clock in the afternoon of the following Monday. Doubtless in deference to Miss Oswald, it was held in the drawing-room of the Oswald mansion. The coroner and his aids, as well as the full jury, were present.

The men impaneled by Hoffman were such as are seldom called to sit on his cases. He had gone into the upper walks of life and picked the biggest men. And that they served, and served willingly, was due solely to the prestige of the name of Oswald. Alive, he was power; dead, the glamor of his deeds, the strength of his mighty determination, reached upward from the grave and plucked his old associates from the bench of the counting house, the mart of the money changer, from every walk of high life; they came to serve him, not the commonwealth in whose name the jury was sitting.

With a jury such as that, I told myself, no verdict of suicide would be rendered, unless the case developed such strong evidence that any other would be impossible. For the honor of his name, it would take proof of the most positive character to make his business associates write down J. Marion Oswald as a self-murderer. Just what facts had the coroner and his assist-

ants unearthed that pointed in that direction? Not a word had reached me; and when a man on the News can't get a word loose anywhere, either there is none, or else someone has clamped the lid on tight.

There were many newspaper men present. The session had to be public and each sheet was represented. Aside from these, and some of the curious public, we numbered less than a score.

Of course Miss Oswald was present and by her side was a new face, but one that I knew; Stitmore Tithes had been her father's consulting attorney ever since he left the University. In a time such as this, his place was by the daughter's side.

The servants, the entire force now, were seated about the room. I found that J. Marion Oswald's staff was not nearly so large as I had surmised. In addition to the two maids and the butler, a third girl and two men made up his house force.

Dr. Thompson sat beside the police surgeon. With the coroner was Dr. James Haslette, the chemist; in the background hovered the same two officers that had accompanied the coroner at the first call. Sullivan was nowhere in sight. Either his presence was unnecessary, or he was completing some task before attending.

The coroner was in no hurry to open the inquest. He sat talking with "Jimmy" until some minutes after two o'clock. When he rose to begin the inquiry, I was all atingle with anticipation. Or was it apprehension? For whom? Now, thought I, the cause of Oswald's death will come out. I had been working nearly a week and all that I knew might be summed up in that first terse comment of Alec Thompson, "poison." The coroner was speaking.

"The jury has been drawn in compliance with, and has fulfilled all the necessary provisions of, the law, in such cases made and provided. We are now sitting in this adjourned session to determine the true cause of his demise."

He paused and glanced from one doctor to the other as though debating which one to call first.

"Death having been duly established by record or otherwise, we will now establish the moment of its occurrence." Now he will call upon Miss Oswald, I thought. Instead he turned to me.

"What time was it when you were called in? Can you fix it definitely?" I was surprised, but answered at once.

"I left Dower Hall where the Lake Michigan Symphonic——"

"Just a moment, please," and he interrupted me. "It is my error and I apologize. But please take this chair," and he indicated one at the table before him. I did so. "Now, your name and occupation. Some of the jury might like to know."

I smiled. It was at the gentleness with which Coroner Hoffman always presided over his inquests. There was nothing harsh or unkindly about the old man; his way with witnesses was somewhat apologetic; he was forever trying to put them at their ease, yet when he went after facts, he got them, if they were gettable.

"Larry Bowen, of the American News."

I paused, thinking he might want to ask more, then receiving no sign from him, continued. He was not taking notes now; his stenographer attended to that. I had nothing to conceal, or to reveal, for that matter, so plunged ahead.

"The Lake Michigan Symphonic Orchestra, of which I am a member, had held a rehearsal at Dower Hall. On my way up the Avenue after this, I had passed a little beyond this residence, when some one at my elbow begged me to come with him."

"The time," threw in the coroner.

"I left the hall at one forty-five; allowing twenty minutes for the walk, it was two five when the butler called me."

"That is near enough for us. It took some time to get to the upper floor?"

"Not to exceed five minutes."

"And Mr. Oswald was then dead." As he made this as a statement, I merely nodded. "Thank you," he went on as he started to dismiss me, then turned back. "You were at the rehearsal of an orchestra?"

"Yes."

"You left at one forty-five, you stated. Isn't that giving a rather short time for any musical work? I assume that rehearsal would not begin before one o'clock."

"Quite right. But our rehearsal had been held in the morning, from ten to twelve. That time suits its members better than any other, as all happen to be on night duty. After the members had been dismissed, the director, two or three others and myself went into the grill. Our meal over, we returned to the concert room to try out some disputed phrasings. In reality I was coming from lunch, but I had considered it as a rehearsal, and so stated it."

When I had finished he sent me back to my own chair. The butler and the two maids were then questioned along the same line; they verified the time I had

given. He next called Dr. Templeton, the police surgeon. After a few preliminaries he asked:

"At what time did you reach Mr. Oswald's side?"

"Three-fifty. He was then dead. He had been dead at this time, about two hours. Not any over that period, I would state, nor very much under it."

"I see. That would place his demise at one-fifty or possibly two o'clock."

"Yes."

The coroner now looked toward Miss Oswald as though to confirm the statement of the doctor. As she made no objection, he presumed that the time had been fixed as approximately correct. Evidently he was trying to spare the daughter as much as possible. He now turned to Dr. Templeton with a new line of inquiries.

"What was the cause of his death?"

"The immediate cause was poison."

I saw Miss Oswald start; her face went pale. She clutched at her lawyer as though she needed support. The maids, too, appeared amazed. Only the butler kept his countenance. He had heard Dr. Thompson declare it, but neither of the maids or Miss Oswald had been present.

It had been no secret; every paper in the city had mentioned it. Yet it did appear to surprise Miss Oswald.

"Poison. What kind?" went on the coroner.

"I am not certain. It is very rare, if what I think, and I have never before seen a death resulting from its use. I prefer not to say."

"But do you know how it was administered?"

"Yes. On our first examination, neither Dr. Thomp-

son nor myself noticed the source of the infection. But at the later investigation, Dr. Haslette being present, we found the means."

The doctor paused. How, I was asking myself, could a poison have been given the dead millionaire? Doubtless it was administered internally for I saw no outward signs. The doctor was continuing.

"On the underside of his left forearm, two inches above the wrist, we found two minute punctures in the skin;—about the size that would be made with a darning needle," he added after a moment's consideration.

"On the underside of the wrist," repeated the coroner. With Dr. Templeton, he went into the details, using a number of medical terms to bring out the exact situation. And I sat back, amazed, and considered the problem. Poisoned and through two small holes! Dr. Templeton finished his testimony and was resuming his seat when Stitmore Tithes halted him with a question.

"Just a moment, Dr. Templeton." The doctor faced the lawyer. "Do you believe that Mr. Oswald introduced the poison into his system himself?"

The doctor looked for a moment at the coroner, then again meeting the eyes of the lawyer, he shook his head. "No," he said, "I must say that I do not think Mr. Oswald took the poison intentionally."

Tithes was quick to see the evasion. "Do you think he might have taken it unintentionally," he hurled back.

Without a moment's hesitation Dr. Templeton answered, "Yes."

One of the jurymen, moved to follow the example of the attorney, asked: "Did you find any poison or any instrument anywhere near Mr. Oswald?"

"No," explained the doctor. "I understand not. The coroner can answer the question. But let me add that if the poison used was what I think, Mr. Oswald would have no time to throw it away, nor to dispose of the tool with which the holes were made."

Dr. Thompson followed Dr. Templeton in giving testimony. He added nothing new to any phases of the case, merely corroborating what statements of mine he could, and confirming the opinions of the other physician. He, too, refused to name the poison. In only one respect did he differ from Dr. Templeton.

Lawyer Tithes, at the conclusion of Alec's testimony, asked the same question previously put to Dr. Templeton. Dr. Thompson's answer had been an emphatic "No."

So far, all that had developed newly was the fact that the poison had entered Mr. Oswald's system through two small punctures on the left arm just above the wrist and on the under side. I had no time for reflection as yet, but those two holes began to puzzle me. How could a man receive two stabs such as those, without knowing it? How could he hold his arm so that there would be where the blow would strike—unless—yes, unless he did it himself? Or unless it was done by some one very near to him and whom he had no cause to suspect?

The latter possibility had not yet been mentioned. On the former, the two doctors most certainly did not agree. Templeton had hesitated, though perhaps to get the coroner's consent before he answered; but he had hesitated. Thompson had not, not for an instant. Was he, then, the stronger in his belief? Did the strength of his belief make it any more correct?

Coroner Hoffman now placed Jimmy on the stand. Here we will find out what the poison is, if the police know it, I told myself. In fact, there appeared no good reason why, if they knew what it was, they should not have revealed its nature before.

If they had made a secret of it, it was probably at the suggestion of Abe Sullivan. If it could be hurled suddenly before the witnesses he might, by watching their faces, get an idea as to who knew something of such a substance. If that were true, they must suspect murder. And if they were going to try it out, then the detective must be hovering about somewhere near. I had not yet seen him, but that did not mean that he was not present.

Formalities out of the way, Dr. Haslette was quizzed as to the poison. Did he know what it was? He did.

"What was the toxic medium by which Mr. Oswald's life was snuffed out?"

"Curari. A not unknown poison, and one from which death is practically instantaneous."

I was so interested that I forgot to watch the faces of the servants, as I had intended. Here, then, was the keynote. A hasty glance at the two doctors satisfied me that it agreed with their theory as to the poison. But there was a deeper look, a look of concern. Curari meant it was no suicide? Or . . . the coroner was going on.

"But the other doctors testified that it entered Mr. Oswald's system through two punctures in the wrist. Is not curari a poison that is only fatal when taken internally?"

"Far from it. In fact, just the reverse. Large quantities of it may be taken into the alimentary tract

with impunity. But if the most minute portion enters the circulatory system directly, it means death."

"Oh, then Mr. Oswald could not himself have taken it. It must have been administered by someone else," and the coroner cast a rapid glance at Stitmore Tithes.

"No, I am not prepared to affirm that. If one desires a rapid, painless death, by slightly scratching the skin of the arm, or reaching a vein or artery of the body with this poison, death will come with lightning speed."

"You speak as one having some knowledge of curari, Dr. Haslette."

"Yes, I know it from a first hand acquaintance." Jimmy hitched over to a new position in his chair. "But permit me to qualify my statement that it was curari. I have used that term because it appears to be that and yet not that. The tests made gave positive reactions for curari. Yet there was a difference. This poison has all the powers of the one named, yet analysis shows it different from any samples of the drug hitherto described. The poison that was found would be curari with something added that did not check its virulence. Possibly, it is such a result as might be obtained by using a plant of the same genera as that commonly employed in making the poison, *Strychnos toxifera*, but of a different variety."

"You mentioned that you had an intimate acquaintance with it," and the coroner returned to a previous statement of Jimmy's.

"Yes, I've seen it used in the lands from which we secure our supplies, the northern countries of South America."

Coroner Hoffman sat up and eyed his witness closely.

"Seen it in use? Do you mean that you have seen men poisoned with it and die from its effects?"

Jimmy shook his head and explained.

"No, not that. I have not seen it used on men, nor did I intend to convey such an idea. The use to which I refer is that for which purpose it is manufactured: to kill animals. Just after I left school, I spent two years in the wilds of northern South America. It is in those parts that the poison is made. The Indians who produce it, anoint their arrows for use in hunting, with curari. It kills, but animals secured through its use are perfectly wholesome."

Perhaps. Yet I don't think I'd care to eat the meat. By the look of repugnance which flashed across her face, I surmised that the same thought was in Isobel Oswald's mind. Jimmy rambled on.

"So when I say I have seen it in use, I refer to its effects on animals. It was only after I had been some time in the country and had become well acquainted with one of the tribes employing it in hunting, that they permitted me to accompany them on an expedition, and see it in action. My first experience of seeing an animal killed with curari impressed me very strongly. Shall I give the details, that you may gather something of its effect?"

The coroner was listening closely while seemingly writing a note. "Go on," he said at once.

"The animal was a buck, a rather large one. The natives' weapon is a blowgun, a long hollow pipe made of a reed, through which they blow a very tiny arrow. They have developed great skill in its manipulation. The distance over which the dart can be sped, and the

accuracy, is marvelous. We crept up to within shooting distance, and one of the hunters pointed his blow-pipe forward. A slight puff, and I caught a glimpse of the deathdealing barb as it started, but at once lost sight of it, so small was it. Almost as soon as the point was blown, the Indians left their concealment and calmly walked up to the deer. It made no move, nor looked in any direction. It stood in its tracks making no attempt to run. In its large eyes was no terror of us; for a space, possibly thirty seconds, it stood, then dropped. In a few moments it was dead."

"Then you infer that its action is not instantaneous," the coroner inquired, as Dr. Haslette ended his description. The official was referring to the poison.

"Well, that depends upon what you mean by instantaneous. Also, on the strength of the mixture. If you mean death within two or three minutes, I say yes. As to how strong the curari is I can report that I developed a solution from the test specimens, and guinea-pigs inoculated with it were dead in fifteen minutes, though they never moved after the poison touched them. Pigs into which the pure, strong mixture from the forests is injected, are most certainly dead, even before the needle can be withdrawn. Curari seems to paralyze."

"What would you think in the case of Mr. Oswald?"

"Not knowing the source or the strength of the curari administered, I cannot answer."

Suddenly I sat up. Jimmy's description of the dying deer, its large, fearless eyes, roused a sleeping memory. My glance into the dying—or was it dead—man's eyes recurred to me.

"Pardon me, a moment," I put in, rising and ad-

dressing the coroner. "I have a fact to offer that may be germane to the inquiry. While examining Mr. Oswald on that afternoon, in testing for death I looked at his eyes. Their luster and lack of dullness was at once apparent. It seemed to me that back of them was the light of reason; it was as though he were trying to speak, or to look at someone or something."

The coroner referred my statement to Jimmy, who promptly said that there was little doubt but that such a thing was possible; that the person might be dying or dead, save as to the mind, some time before full death occurred. The other doctors, on being appealed to, agreed with Dr. Haslette; though he was the only one competent to speak with any authority.

"Is it possible to obtain curari in this country?" the coroner asked.

"Yes," the department chemist explained. "Much is imported each year. It has medicinal value, being used in minute doses in counteracting the effects of the bite of an animal afflicted with rabies; also, sometimes in tetanus. Anyone, with a physician's prescription, could get it. I know of no stock at the present, but it is listed as an importation."

"Is it a liquid easily carried about?" While Jimmy was answering, the coroner sent out of the room by one of the officers the note which he had finished.

"No," replied the expert to the question. "It is a resinous substance and unless a tiny portion could be introduced directly, a solution would have to be prepared. In color curari is black with a tinge of brown; it has a shiny appearance, like some gums, and is very brittle; when it breaks it splits into tiny flakes. I incline to believe that the brittleness has much to do

with its virulence. The finer it splits, the more quickly the blood dissolves the minute particles."

"Then sometimes it is a liquid, sometimes a solid. Which form resulted in Mr. Oswald's death?"

Dr. Haslette was in no hurry to answer. He considered it for some little time, tapping the fingers of his left hand on the table before him, before he replied. What he really thought may have had a bearing, or may not, but his answer, when it came, was disappointing.

"It cannot be known, definitely. I may think one thing, but I cannot know. Action would be the same; the absorbing of the curari into the blood, then death. This comes by paralysis of the terminations of the motor nerves. You will know what that means. Loss of every movement. The nerves which control the lungs stop acting; the lungs no longer function; death results from suffocation."

The poor girl, listening to all this testimony, gave a great sob. She, too, realized what it meant. Her father had died of suffocation. All alone, with no woman intimate to appeal to, how great was her sorrow! Used as I am to tears and trouble, inured to scenes of suffering, yet my heart ached for Isobel Oswald. Possibly the coroner also had her in mind, for the next question brought a mite of cheer.

"Then Mr. Oswald died in the manner described. Was death painful?"

"Not at all, if we may judge from numerous experiments on animals. It is a calm, easy, peaceful way of crossing into the far land. The agony of suffocation is entirely lacking. What seems to be needed is not

only the power to breathe, but the desire. Death comes more easily than falling asleep."

This line of inquiry was followed for some time with several questions on various phases of the action of curari. During these Abe Sullivan came in and took a chair beside the coroner. As the officer returned at the same time, the inference was that the note had been for the detective. He spoke no word but as he sat down, in reply to a look flashed by the coroner, he shook his head.

There was one final question, then Jimmy Haslette was permitted to retire.

"How long does the poison retain its power; how long does it keep its ability to kill?"

"No one knows," was Jimmy's assertion. "I wouldn't want to risk my life against a spear that had been poisoned a thousand years previously. But as for actual knowledge, what we know of curari is of so recent obtaining, that we are in no position to make definite statements."

As Jimmy retired, the coroner politely requested Miss Oswald to take his place.

The unfortunate girl was near collapse. Had I been her adviser, or had I possessed the right, I would have forbidden her being questioned at this time. No one else made objection, and, white as paper, she straightened up and came forward. Stitmore Tithes assisted her to her feet, then made as though to walk forward by her side, supporting her; but she declined his proffered assistance, motioning him to remain in his seat.

As she marched proudly erect, to the table, I caught something of the indomitable will of the house of Oswald. She, the last branch of her father's tree, up-

bore the honor of the name. Though the female of the species may be a weakling, nothing in her carriage or demeanor showed other than strength and courage. "Like father, like son." No, far oftener it is "like father, like daughter." From mother to son, from father to daughter, descend those traits of strength. The mantle of J. Marion Oswald had fallen upon worthy shoulders.

Erect, her slender figure swept forward. But her face was white, deadly white; she could not have exhibited more pallor had she been the one to press the poison into the veins of J. Marion Oswald.

CHAPTER V.

A GHOSTLY VISITANT.

MISS OSWALD approached the chair designated for those giving testimony, but she did not sit down. Facing the coroner, she burst out in passionate protest. Her voice was the same low, sweet music that had first greeted my ear, like the wind playing on the strings of a harp; but now it was pitched in a minor key, torn with anguish.

“Oh, sir, why wasn’t I told that father had been poisoned? How could you bring me here to surprise me with it, at such a time as this?” and she seemed on the verge of tears; but they did not come.

Coroner Hoffman was nonplused. Instead of putting a question, he had met one that I fancied would be rather difficult for him to answer. I sympathized keenly with Miss Oswald, but I, too, recalled a lack of openness on the part of the coroner’s department; they had kept the knowledge of the name of the poison away from me, when I had been in on every other point.

“My dear Miss Oswald,” and the coroner rose from his chair and walked to her side, “I am more grieved than I can tell you. Had you consulted me, gladly would I have told you all we knew. I was unaware that you did not know that your father had died from the effects of poison. We made no attempt to conceal

the fact. We only kept to ourselves the means and the nature of the agent, until we were certain that we knew. I supposed that everyone knew what had been published in all the papers——”

“At a time when father had just left me, can you think that I had time for newspapers? Oh, I could not, I could not! And now to hear that father was poisoned! I had believed that it was paralysis. In that Dr. Thompson specializes.”

The unfortunate girl! With a griping pain at his breast, Larry Bowen would have desired to creep up and crave absolution. For it was I that had suggested calling in Dr. Thompson, and it was through my remark, “He is a specialist in paralysis,” that she had been led to believe that her father’s death was the result of such a seizure.

I saw it all now; not a soul to tell the bereaved child that her father had died from poison. She had not been in the room when Dr. Templeton first made the statement; nor had either of the maids; neither had any of these heard Dr. Templeton confirm his colleague’s diagnosis. The only member of the household who might have imparted the news to either Miss Oswald or her maids was the butler; and he did not impress me as a man much given to talking.

“I am sorry, Miss Oswald,” the coroner repeated. Then gravely placing his hand on her shoulder, he added, “Had I known, I would gladly have explained the matter to you, myself. But there can be no doubt of the cause of his death. It was, as you have heard, curari, and entered his system through the two holes.”

If possible, Miss Oswald straightened up taller,

threw her head back, looked him full in the face; her features were calm and filled with a grim confidence.

"Then," and her low tones filled the room, "find his murderer. Find him, no matter what the cost. Is a reward necessary? Then offer it; any amount; ten thousand, a hundred thousand, five hundred, more; anything, any amount, but find the man who did it."

The coroner backed away in surprise.

"No, no, Miss Oswald. No reward is necessary; any such sums as you mention are preposterous. Every avenue will be searched, every means taken to apprehend him, if there is a murderer. It is the duty of the police to find the guilty party, or parties. The justice of the law is evenhanded. Just as resolutely will the police department attack the problem and find the slayer of a poor child in the tenements, and with as much persistence, as the assassin of a millionaire. There is no need of a reward as yet. If, after this jury renders its verdict, the police should fail—and they are but human—then would be the time. It might bring information from some one who, otherwise, would remain silent."

It sounds fine, I told myself; but I winked the other eye when the coroner told of the police not working for a reward. B-U-N-K. I wish I might have shared in some of the rewards they divided. But Hoffman was again speaking.

"On the other hand, possibly your father was not murdered."

Miss Oswald countered immediately.

"And under no circumstances was it suicide."

"Quite true," admitted the coroner. "But beyond

these two means is a third: It might have been accidental."

"An accident? Why, on such a theory, how could those two pricks get in his arm?"

"That we do not know as yet, Miss Oswald. It is that we are trying to find out. If you will kindly answer a few questions and will tell us everything you may think of that might have a bearing on his death, we may arrive at the solution of the matter. And now, will you not please be seated?"

Miss Oswald obeyed. The burst of feeling to which she had given way, had quieted her. She readily complied with his request and in response to questions, told of events on that fatal day. She described how her father had left the dinner table with a jest on his lips, and had gone up to the museum, how she had been busy for an hour, then had tripped to the upper floor to ask him about a ball they had planned on giving, how she had gone into the room and, not seeing him, called, then stepped forward only to find him all in a heap, how she had sent for aid, and how assistance had come. The remainder of her story was but a repetition of that told by the rest of us.

The coroner then began to inquire somewhat minutely into the home life of herself and her father. She told how they passed the days, and how her worry over her father had increased lately; for since he had retired, she feared that paralysis might attack him, as it attacked many men who, having led active lives all their years, retired and became inactive in old age.

"Father was interested in so many things. Years ago he began on his museum; it represents a great sum but a still greater effort on his part. Within the past

two years he became attracted to the occult; his studies in spiritism developed in him strong mediumistic powers and he and I have passed many an evening in communication with spirits from the realm beyond. Oh, I wonder if he will get a message back to me now," and tears filled her eyes.

How that company of hard-headed officials and reporters sat up when she revealed the trend of J. Marion Oswald's latest hobby. Spiritism! Ghosts—long white things in a fog! Slate writing! Spirit rapping! I have no doubt a score of similar ideas rose in the minds of her hearers. I know there did in mine.

Did my fellow workers of the press smack their lips? Did they! Over a juicy morsel like that! What didn't it mean to them! So, in addition to his other fads, Oswald, the multimillionaire, tried to raise ghosts.

Even the coroner, schooled to unusual happenings, failed to repress the look of surprise that flashed over his features. Evidently the doings of Mr. Oswald along this line were news to him, too. But he did not fail to seize the opening offered.

"You say that your father was a student of psychic phenomena and was something of a medium himself."

"Oh, yes. Of course in the beginning he consulted others, the foremost in these lines. But for over a year he has neither been near them nor had them come to him."

"You are sure of this?"

"Certainly; he told me so."

"Did you and he ever receive communications purporting to come from the other world?"

"Many times, as I told you before." She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. So casual was it that we inferred

that these had become so common with her as to be accepted as the usual. "When father first became interested, he was very careful to conceal his identity whenever he visited a medium. He never had Henry drive him within blocks of the place; and still further to conceal his personality, he always dressed differently for each visit. I am sure he was successful in thus disguising himself. He never received a letter from a single one of the professionals consulted. I am positive he would have told me if they had written; nor have any of the mediums on whom he called visited our house."

"When you first spoke, you mentioned something about their coming to him."

"Yes. When he desired more sittings with any certain medium, he had her come to a flat on 19th Avenue. Father took the whole of one floor, furnished and ready for use, in a residence there. But this going to others he had abandoned a year ago. Since then, he himself has been the medium. In the beginning we experienced much difficulty. Slate writing, automatic writing, rappings, every possible means we tried, but with indifferent success. Within the last few months, however, he had succeeded. His success took the form of materializations; we were getting excellent results."

The coroner had resumed his seat and now leaned far back. He gave a false appearance of being little interested in what Miss Oswald was saying. Yet he ceased not to delve deeper and deeper with every question.

"Ah, yes. Materializations. What form did they take? I assume that you were present, you speak so confidently."

"Many times. The materializations were always of the same personality. After a few experiments father got so he could summon this spirit. We tried it many nights. Sometimes we called her every evening of the week, but she did not always come. We were following a definite line of questioning of which father hoped great things."

"Where did you hold the séances? That is, on what floor and in what room?"

"On this floor in father's study just off his bedroom."

"Did the friend from the other world have a name?"

"She answered to that of Deborah."

Miss Oswald settled back in her chair and for half an hour explained more or less in detail what the messages had been. The queries of the coroner brought out that they were the usual medley of facts from the life of the sitter; things which perhaps had been forgotten, or that were known to one person, alone; prophecies of the future and guiding advice for daily tasks, yet all somewhat vague even when retold by Miss Oswald, who clearly believed in them.

"Do you retain the very first message your father received through the spirit," the coroner wanted to know.

"Oh, yes. It is easily recalled, for it was one of the signs that Deborah had come; she always opened her communications with the same phrase. Father said that it was a summons for him, that it meant he had not long for this world, but I thought that was going too far in interpreting it."

"But what was the message, Miss Oswald?"

“‘Do not forget, Marion: before it is too late, repent.’ ”

“Oh, yes.” As she spoke it, the coroner wrote it down, then leaned forward and carefully read it to her.

“‘Do not forget, Marion.’ That must have been your father. Marion was his name.”

Miss Oswald inclined her head.

“‘Do not forget’ what? Did he ever say?”

“No. I do not believe that he knew just what she meant, either.” The coroner went on.

“‘Before it is too late, repent.’ Of what? Or was that, too, something of a mystery?”

Again Miss Oswald signified that it had been. Hoffman dropped this line and entered upon a new one.

“How did you get the message? Was it written?”

“Oh, no. She always spoke. Slowly, with an effort, and her voice was very faint, seeming to come from a very great distance away.”

The coroner arose and stepped nearer Miss Oswald. Dropping two fingers into his vest pocket he fished about a moment, then produced the small, torn paper that I had picked up from beneath the body of Mr. Oswald as it was being lifted.

“Did you ever see this before,” he asked.

She put forth a hand and took the slip. She looked at it with interest, turning it over and over, then spoke the word, or part of a word, written there.

“‘Pent,’ ‘pent,’ that means dammed back, confined. No, to my certain knowledge, I never saw this tiny piece of paper before. What does it mean? Where was it found?”

“We do not know its meaning. It was discovered

beneath your father's body in the museum," the coroner explained.

Miss Oswald was startled. "What!" she cried. Her eyes roved about over the company and rested for a moment on mine. How I wanted to go to her, to help her. Was the coroner leading her into a trap? Nonsense, I thought. He has nothing, can have nothing against her. At last her glance returned to the official.

"Oh, I see," she said. "Then you think this is connected with his death. But why 'pent'?" She studied the slip again. "Oh, yes; it is the end of a word. Why, 'repent' is such a one, the very last of the message Deborah always left us. Do you think that father might have written it down and this is part of it? Did you find the rest of the sheet?"

"No, it has not yet been discovered."

"But this type doesn't look like that from the machine father has here. It is distinctly different."

"We believe that the type which made that impression were on a Densmore machine," Hoffman explained to her.

"Oh, then father cannot have written it, for his was an Oliver. It is of the same model as the one I have in my room, a number five."

Stitmore Tithes added a word. "And the machine used by Mr. Oswald's secretary at his office in the Exchange Building is an Underwood. All those used at the firm's place of business, as well as in the factories, are Remingtons. It so chances that in our offices we also use the latter machine."

The coroner thanked him, then turned to Miss Oswald.

"It thus appears that your father did not write this. Have you any idea as to who did?"

She had not. With this final question she was permitted to return to her chair. The maids followed each other in quick succession in the seat at the table. Their testimony gave us nothing new. It but corroborated that already heard. The butler came next. His name was Joshua Tasker, sir, and he had been in service for forty-eight years, beginning in Lord Scanlon's employ when but fifteen years of age. Yes, sir; Lord Scanlon lived near Lunnon. His testimony added but little to the mass already gleaned, but he confirmed the materializations.

"Yes, sir. I have seen the spirit, sir. One night I had need to visit Mr. Oswald's room at about ten minutes to twelve. As I entered the room, I saw a figure all in white glide across the room and disappear."

"Glide," the coroner interrogated, puzzled. "What do you mean by glide? Just how did it move? Where did it disappear?"

"Well, sir, it didn't seem to walk. It sort of floated through the air, like, and gradually raised up. It disappeared through the side of the room."

"Which side?"

"The side that overlooks the south, sir. It is the outside wall of the house. There are two large windows in it."

"Hum, windows! Two of them."

"Yes, sir, and they were both locked. I know 'cause I went and looked at them, sir. It is my duty to see that all doors and windows are fastened up for the night, sir."

"And Mr. Oswald and Miss Isobel were in the adjoin-

ing study holding the séance when you saw her?"

"Oh, no, sir. They were not at home."

A new thought. So Deborah did not confine her visits strictly to calls from Mr. Oswald but materialized occasionally on her own responsibility.

"Were you not frightened when you encountered the apparition? Had you no fear of the ghosts?" inquired Hoffman.

"Oh, no, sir. It is not for the like of me to meddle in the affairs of my master. If he has spirits to visit him, they would want nothing to do with folks like me, sir. No, sir. They would not disturb me. Ghosts could be sociable if they wished, but servants have not time for such things."

Tasker was excused. The chauffeur was called. He was Henry Deltour. No, he knew nothing about the apparition. No, he had never been in the museum. No, he could assist in no way. But under questioning, he did confirm Miss Oswald's statement that he had never driven Mr. Oswald to a medium's house or office. Often he had seen him get out and walk away, though of course he did not know where Mr. Oswald was going.

The other servants had nothing to offer. The maid with whom Annie O'Regan had been when she had heard her mistress call and, later, Elsinore Trevecott's voice, made good all the testimony Annie had given.

Coroner Hoffman now called on Abe Sullivan. I wondered if the psychic phenomena as detailed by Miss Oswald had made much of an impression upon the detective. Had he known of this latest hobby of the master of the house? Probably not.

The questions now turned back to the death and its cause.

"Did you ever see a case of curari poisoning before?" the coroner asked Abe.

"No."

"What about this case impressed you most?"

"The two holes in the wrist."

"What about them?"

"They were much smaller than would be made by a snake's fangs, unless the snake were very small," Abe explained. "They were one and one-half inches apart. It is their position that impresses me."

"How could they be inflicted in such a place?"

"I don't know. I made various experiments, but unless I was willing, no one could strike me there, on the inside of the wrist; this place is too protected. Also, I found it difficult to place my arm, while using it, in a position that would expose it to such an accident, unless I extended it high above my head."

"You examined the museum thoroughly?"

"Yes. The whole house, as well," Sullivan affirmed.

"You found the curari? Or the container that held the drug?"

"No, neither. Nor have we found any druggists or wholesale drug dealers who have sold any for over three months."

"Did you find any traces of curari in the museum?"

"Yes. There were two arrows which had tips that had been poisoned with it. But these could not have been used," Sullivan explained, "for both were broad and made of stone. We tested the points and, while the curari remained, the arrows, if used, would have made a wound an inch wide."

"Where were the arrows?"

"In a case near the north wall, thirty-one feet from

where the body was found. The case was locked and to open it we got the keys from Mr. Oswald's secretary who took them from the safe in the office where they are kept."

"Were there other poisons in the museum?"

"In the Rattlesnake Dance group were the mounted rattlers. Among a group of spears marked, 'From Africa,' we also found three poisoned lances. Guinea-pigs inoculated with a solution made from scrapings from these spears, all died but under far different conditions from those scratched with a curari-treated scalpel. We tried several of the guineas on the fangs of the rattlers. The pigs all lived."

"Did you investigate everything in the museum?"

"We tried to. There are too many articles to study every one. So we assumed that no accident could have happened from any object locked behind glass, and gave our time and interest to the articles outside of cases. We paid particular attention to everything near where Mr. Oswald was found."

"Any results?"

"None. The tapestry that had hung on the wall had neither metal stitches nor metal in its makeup. The dyes used in coloring the threads were harmless. The huge chest had no broken or jagged edges. We opened it. It contained nothing. The mounted armor was very rusty, but harmless." Abe continued for some time cataloguing and explaining what had been the results of his examination of probably fifty articles that were within ten feet of Mr. Oswald's body when it was found. The coroner now approached the human element in his questioning.

"Would it have been possible for someone to have

entered by a window, or to have shot an arrow from one?"

"How would the arrow have been withdrawn? No, there is no chance of such a thing. We looked at every window. Only one opens on a fire-escape. This is to the rear of the house and the escape drops into a small flower garden. This is almost continually under the eyes of one or the other of the maids in the kitchen. Also, the house-man spends much of his time working about the rear of the house. No one could scale the other walls; and had they managed to do it, the windows would have been found locked."

"The roof?"

"Is pointed; very steep. No entrance through it to the upper floor, the museum."

"Have you any knowledge to add concerning the fragment of paper picked up?"

"No."

"Each typewriter has an individuality of its own, differing even from others of the same make, has it not?"

The detective nodded.

"Will you not, then, be able to identify the very machine that wrote those four letters, p-e-n-t?"

"If we get the machine, yes. But we are not going to run all over Chicago looking at thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of Densmores in use. Even if we did, we might miss the very machine that made the letters. Besides, we do not know but that the slip was written outside of Chicago."

A few more formalities, questions by Mr. Tithes, some queries by different ones among the jury, and Coroner Hoffman herded these latter into another room.

In a brief space they reached an agreement on a verdict and returned while it was read to us.

"We find that J. Marion Oswald came to his death by poisoning with curari introduced into his left arm by some person or persons to the jury unknown."

As we were preparing to leave, Miss Oswald came to me holding out her hand.

"I have never had the pleasure of an introduction to you, Mr. Bowen," she said, "but after all you did for me in my time of trouble, I feel that I know you. Let me thank you most sincerely for your assistance."

"It was nothing, Miss Oswald," I told her as I took her hand and held it in a period all too brief. "At any time, or in any way that I can be of use to you, I am at your command." I would have liked to add much more but—well, I have a little sense, praise be.

"Will you not call some time shortly? I wish to talk over with you the offer of a reward. I am sure that the coroner did not understand my offer."

Stitmore Tithes had come up behind her. Now he moved up to her side. "Oh, no, Miss Oswald," he broke in, ignoring me altogether, "I am sure that the coroner was right." His voice was smooth and silky. "A huge offer such as you wish to make would only attract everyone who might hope by chance to hit on the solution of how your father came to his death."

Why did he have to come butting in just then? Why did he oppose a reward? I did a little ignoring myself.

"Oh, yes, Miss Oswald," I explained, "I can see many reasons why a reward would be a good thing. It will get all the information that is out. It gets it not only from people who want to sell it, but also reaches those who do not want money for what they

know. The wide advertising such an offer gets does it."

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen," and she rewarded me with a faint smile. "You will come and see me soon, will you not?" I promised. Had I dared, I'd have been back the next day; but I didn't go for some time.

When Miss Oswald turned to introduce me to Tithes, he had slipped away and was busy talking to the coroner. A rather odd look overspread her features but she said nothing.

The papers played up the Oswald death to the limit.

Chicago's richest man murdered by a rare South American poison; murderer unknown. Ghostly visitant warns him (for they promptly accepted what Miss Oswald had told of her father's belief in approaching dissolution) of his death.

As for the slip of paper, each handled it differently. Some thought it was a coincidence; others that the murderer dropped it; and so on; but they all agreed that "pent," was but the last part of "repent."

After I had finished writing at the office, I got a piece of gossip from the society editor that made me sit up. It seemed to add another angle to the Oswald case! Had he known it, it might have offered him a new line of suspicion to develop, I thought. It might point—— But who can gather all strings for an inquiry as early as a coroner's inquest? Certainly not the coroner, whose business it was to point the finger of suspicion.

CHAPTER VI.

CONSIDERATIONS.

MY stuff had all gone in and I sat talking with some of the boys. They had followed the mystery up to this point and I had detailed the results of the inquiry. In expressing their opinions, some took the stand that Oswald had been murdered; others that it was suicide; some few held it an accident.

Peter Groove said it was an "act of God." Pete was a religious radical, a most peculiar combination, and of course he thought the old millionaire ought to suffer some here below for all the wrongs he had done his fellow men; said that an eternity of the Lord's punishment wasn't enough to compensate for the hell old Oswald had made of this life for a host of people.

It was not so bad as that. J. Marion Oswald was no worse than most of his fellow business men. He had lived and acted solely for the good of J. Marion, any and all the time, with a little more success than the other fellow. That was all, but that most people would not forgive him. The old man had done some pretty decent things, too. It was he who, during the war, insisted on a horizontal increase for every toiler in his employ; this over the opposition of all the other unified business directors with whom he was associated. Wages did jump up, too; not a paltry ten or fifteen cents a day, but fifty and seventy-five percent on each man's

daily stipend. It was this move on his part that contributed so greatly in driving up wages in the other big plants.

More enemies? Sure! The woods must have been full of those who would have liked to strangle the old fellow, not only in a business way, but actually as well. In this "long and active life of mine," of thirty-two years, I've noticed that you can take away a man's wife, remove his children, besmirch his character, do him any injury except—well, just as soon as you lay your finger on his pocketbook you touch his very soul. And the souls of untold thousands had writhed under the touch of J. Marion Oswald.

This made all the more difficult the finding of his murderer. If we investigated the whereabouts on that eventful noon of everyone who wished the old millionaire dead, we'd have had on our list over half of our good American citizens. If we did undertake the task, and in spite of the verdict it turned out to be a case of suicide, our pains would be all for nothing. I foresaw that the investigation would be a merry little chase for Larry Bowen. Me?—Sure. The chief had me in—and right out again—with, "Find out the truth about this death."

That is what one gets for bringing in the correct guess on a few paltry little mysteries that had puzzled the police. Had he, the chief, remembered my wonderful guess on the first odd happening with which I had been tangled up, the episodes of the supernatural, he might not have been so enthusiastic about my unravelling this puzzle. Newspaper men's memories are about as short as they say their readers' are. It was Cyrus Herron who pulled me out before.

While the boys were hot at work solving the burning question, Hazel Dell strolled over. She is our society editor with another name for home use; but Hazel Dell is carried at the head of the column. She listened a few moments, then threw in her little bombshell.

"Say, Larry, did you know that Miss Oswald was engaged to Stitmore Tithes?"

Well, wouldn't that make a fellow sit up and take notice! Engaged to that long, stiff creature! Why, he must be twenty-five years older than she. He looked fifty, if he looked a day.

"What kind of match is it?" one of the boys inquired.

"Oh," explained Hazel, "it is supposed to be a love match. He hasn't anything, at least only a good practice. It is whispered that Papa helped to make the plans."

Old Oswald conspiring to marry his daughter to a man nearly old enough to be her father! My blood began to show signs of climbing to two hundred and twelve degrees. J. Marion dropped in my estimation nearly to the bottom of the column. My plans for going up to call on Miss Oswald the very next afternoon suddenly faded away. I wasn't in so much of a hurry. I went next morning and had the butler give me my cornet.

Up to now matters had rolled off the press of events too quickly for me to do more than catch them as they came. I wanted time to consider them, to get their bearings and relations.

I did not stay long with the boys after Hazel's revelation. Leaving them still arguing, I set off on my supposed journey to the end of the mystery. In

reality I sought my room, pulled out my big chair, and sat down to think it over.

One by one I turned over all the facts brought out; but when I came to study them, I found few of value. Take the decision of the jury that it was a homicide: Granted that this was the truth, on one hand we had a clever murderer, on the other, a whole nation from which to choose him.

But I could not confine my deliberations to murder. I had to consider all possibilities. Of these there were three: J. Marion Oswald died as the result of an accident, he committed suicide, or he was murdered. Very simple, was it not!

An accident? Nothing so far developed tended to show that it was.

Suicide? His daughter had been closer to him than any other living soul. Mr. Oswald had loved her with a love that was proverbial among their friends in Chicago. She was not only an only daughter, but his close confidant as well. She was firm in her belief that it was murder. After all, self-destruction was most improbable. If ever man had reason for living, J. Marion Oswald was that man.

Murder? If we might judge by the number of those who wished him dead, it was murder beyond a doubt. Had J. Marion been a cheap business man with as many haters as had the millionaire a dozen hired killers would have put him out of the way in a week. But even the Chicago gangster indulges in occasional spasms of self-preservation. For one of that ilk to "get" a man like J. Marion Oswald, using their methods, methods at once recognized by the police, meant suicide.

No, if someone had hated the old man enough to put him out of the way, it had been a personal task.

But when I came to consider the difficulties attending such a murder! It seemed impossible that anyone could have reached him. As for a face-to-face killing, that was unthinkable. Would J. Marion Oswald calmly have extended his arm and permitted his enemy to drive in the poison? Besides, I couldn't see how it would be humanly possible for anyone to get up to that fourth floor without being seen by the servants.

The butler's place was in the hall. Anyone entering by the front, would have been seen by him; or if they did slip by, he would have seen or heard them on the stairs, as practically the whole flight was visible from his post. Likewise the fire-escape was impractical. The man in the yard would notice anyone climbing to the fourth story; or the kitchen girl would have seen the start of the climb. But, granted that without being noticed, someone did get up, what then? The windows were all locked fast, especially the one on the fire-escape which had special fastenings placed by order of Mr. Oswald. But suppose that they had been open, would J. Marion have quietly stood and let someone climb in?

Might not the murderer have hidden in the room? If so, how did he effect his escape? Down the stairs and out? Almost impossible. By the window to the escape, or other opening? Then how lock it after him? An airship might have brought the man and have taken him away. Fine chance! A huge, roaring machine to come and pick up a person on such an errand! Any theory such as this, would suppose at least two in the plot. Well, if there were two, sooner

or later the two would become three; and three is the multitude. The facts would leak out. We'd get the news.

Of course there are other ways than direct killing. The poison might have been secreted about some device which would, at the proper time, drive two poison pins into J. Marion Oswald and close the chapter. But if so, the device would be left. Where was it? Everything in the museum had been there for at least months. The last things received, as I found out through Sullivan, who got the information from the butler, were a case containing a single, huge Tuscan amphora and a dozen Alaskan halibut hooks, carved by natives more than two hundred years before. One could not by any effort squeeze a wrist into the narrow slit between the point and the wood. But no chances were taken; they were tested for poison; none was found.

No! No weird machine was found. The probability that the curari was introduced into Mr. Oswald's system by such a method was not one that appealed to me. Everything on that floor had been a museum exhibit; there being no strange device that was out of place, that theory had to be dismissed as a tenable hypothesis.

In these days of great inventions, criminals are keeping right along with the rest of the procession; sometimes I think that they are a few laps ahead. Only lately, it was reported that death could be sent over a wire. I had not heard of anyone sending a material object, such as curari, over one—yet. But nothing is impossible.

After all, how does a material object differ from an electric current? I do not know; if we really, and

fully understood, may they not be the same thing? Does not the beam of light, the X-ray, of peculiar structure, of course, do what a few years ago we would have declared impossible? No, nothing is impossible. It might be possible to send curari over a wire and into a man's wrist as he held the receiver of a telephone. But, J. Marion Oswald had no phone on that floor.

Over an electric wire then? How localize it so that it would strike a given person, in a given place, at a given time? This was getting too deep for me. All this *might* be possible, but it was a long way ahead of my time. I might just as well postulate a means of sending poison by wireless.

What a life we would lead were this possible. Lovely—that is no name for it. I, John Smith, do not like Peter Jones. Bingo, I turn a little switch, a wireless wave conveys the drug to said Peter Jones, and Peter ceases to have any interest in mundane matters. “Larry Bowen, me boy,” said I, “get back on the track. You won’t find out who killed J. Marion Oswald by any such wild guess as that.”

“Yes, and if you do find out, me bold lad,” my reason responded, “it will be by a guess or an accident.” “Then,” answered I, cheerfully, “I have a chance; for fully nine-tenths of all happenings down on this plane are accidents.”

So I harked back to the means, letting probable, or possible, or impossible causes take care of themselves. What did we know about the means?

Easy to start with. There was the poison, curari; there were the two holes in J. Marion's wrist. How did the poison get into the holes? I didn't know.

How did it get into the house, the museum? Same answer.

Second start. A torn scrap of paper. Where did it come from? Probably dropped from the clothes of J. Marion Oswald. How did it get there? Either through his own agency or an outside one. It bore the letters, "p-e-n-t," and a fraction of another one. The word of which it had been a part was probably "repent." In view of what Miss Oswald had told us, it undoubtedly was that.

But who had written it? Unknown. And, after all, had it really any connection with his death? I doubted it. No visible connection existed. Except for its being torn, it would have been entitled to no more credence than the other papers found in his pockets; these were simple business communications and statements. But the fact that it had not been in his pockets but apparently had dropped from somewhere about his person as he was lifted, and that it was torn, gave it an importance not to be ignored.

The other unusual feature of the case was an apparition. Here was a figure, transparent, with a weak, far-away voice, according to Miss Oswald, which wraith came from the mystic realms beyond the river. For what? To tell J. Marion Oswald what he had done on an earth plane in the past, what he would do in the future, and to convey a warning. Rather puerile; also, wholly selfish. Purely individual, I noticed. Nothing that benefited anyone except J. Marion and his daughter. And they had about all the blessings life can bestow upon those here below.

Had this ghostly visitor appeared to some poor tenement dweller, heartsick and bitter, and told him how

to escape the gloom and the worry which break his spirit and tear his soul, it might have been doing something that would coincide with our ethical and moral beliefs. "Bear the burdens of the weak." "As ye do to the least of these, so ye do unto me."

Evidently, spirits in the other world do not practice love for the weaker vessels on their plane, any more than we do here. Anyway, they seem to appear only to those who have little need of aid or succor, however much they may need comforting.

Let us be just, though. It may be that the vital matter is to establish beyond cavil, the existence of a means of communication between those who have passed and those who remain. In that case, it is work with those whose life spark is attuned to catch the vibrations coming from the other shore. If J. Marion Oswald was especially fitted to receive such messages from the region beyond the grave, he was but fulfilling his destiny in attempting to write a record men could not dispute.

But this materialization: That touched a rather raw chord. In my time I have seen so many fakes, that I am decidedly skeptical. Yes, and I have seen at least one genuine spirit. She came back, not for the cheap tawdry purposes most alleged spirits materialize to sustain, but for love, an abiding, never-ending love. What would not I give for a love like that!

I hasten to add: She did not appear in Chicago. Oh, no! There may be genuine soul-wraiths that could bear to leave the beautiful land beyond to come back to Chicago, but I never saw any of them. Frauds? Oh, yes; many spectres appear in the Windy City but—well, the less said, the better.

Which made me doubt Miss Oswald's account. It was true; I did not doubt that she had seen something. Also, by her testimony, it was evident that for over a year her father had no connections directly, with an outside medium. If this were so, none of these could have a reason for working a fake on him. Then, too, according to Miss Oswald, no cabinet was used. They simply sat in her father's darkened study and called Deborah. Sometimes she came; sometimes she did not. A rather independent spirit! It was somewhat peculiar that she appeared always in the door of J. Marion's bedroom. But that room had no other outlets save a door to his bath, which was a closed room, and two windows in the south side of the house, and a front window, east. To them it was as though Deborah came out of a closed closet, gave her message and, returning to it, disappeared. There was no egress from Mr. Oswald's sleeping apartment, save through his study.

This spirit visitor did not write; (who knew if she could or could not?) but she spoke. Always she prefixed her other communications with a fixed formula. Yes, and sometimes as she dissolved, ended the sessions with it. At which times, Miss Oswald told us at the inquest, her voice grew very faint, trailing off into nothing.

Her message at these times was, "Do not forget, Marion; before it is too late, repent." Marion clearly was J. Marion Oswald, though it must have been years since anyone had been intimate enough with him to call him that. Old friends and relatives who had known a "Marion," one by one had slipped away. His newer friends and business associates referred to him, to his

face at least, as Mr. Oswald. To his daughter he was "father."

Perhaps Deborah had been one of his friends in the days long gone. I decided that a dip into the past might bring to light someone who would recall an acquaintance of J. Marion Oswald's acquaintances who bore the name of the old prophetess of Israel.

The J. in Oswald's name stood for Josh and had been given by his grandfather. Not Joshua or Joshibel, but plain old Josh. No wonder that the boy had barely reached his teens before he began to sign himself, J. Marion. Think of calling a boy "Josh" in Chicago!

Yes, the message was for him. It was delivered to him; his name was used. About as convincing proof as can be secured here below.

"Do not forget." Forget what? There must have been plenty of incidents in his life that J. Marion would wish to forget; but what was there he should not forget?

"Before it is too late, repent." Repent of what? There were so many things he should have repented and made right; not that they were not in accordance with our liberal code of business ethics, perhaps, though they certainly were far from right according to modern thought and morals, that any search through these would but muddle up the case more completely.

"Repent," sounded like an exhortation from a revivalist. I had never before heard of a visitor from the other world turning evangelist. Yet, "live and learn." Possibly, we down here are turning so far aside from the straight and narrow path, that mediums are going to call back the exhorters who have passed over to set us aright.

The chief had said, "Go find the murderer." A fine chance I had. All there was to go on was curari poison shot in through the wrist, a scrap of paper, and a ghost. And the worst of it was, I could see no connection between the three save a dubious "repent" on the paper and in the warning of the spirit.

I decided I'd go and see Abe Sullivan. I dressed, caught a car and found him in his office. He, too, had been trying to think it out. Abe was willing enough to talk now. I have favored him many times in the past and if there is no prohibition on his speech, he has ever proved willing to share with me any information he may secure, or discoveries he may make.

"Larry," he remarked as he leaned back in his chair, his feet high on his desk, "we aren't going to find the murderer." He puffed out a fine ring of smoke and, with his cigar dangling from his fingers, watched it drift up and apart. When it was dissipated he turned on me, adding, "No, we won't find him; for mark you, there wasn't any murderer. Old Oswald killed himself."

So Abe had drifted round to that position.

"That's all right, Abe, but the chief sent me out to find that very personage. I've got to dig him up. Shall I cast you for chief place? Got a good alibi?"

"How about your own, lad? You're far more likely to have need of one than I," and he grinned across at me. Come to think of it, I ought to have one about, handy for use, if the police did drop on me. I let the thought slip, and put a question.

"If it was suicide, where did the old man get the poison?"

"Off those arrowheads. He was wise enough to fix it up from them."

"Yes, but how about a motive. A fellow don't go and kick off for nothing at all."

Abe raised his hand to his head and twisted an imaginary crank. "Wheels, my boy, wheels. Look what he was dabbling in. Folks that are not off don't mix up with that kind of stuff." Long years on the force had made Abe a skeptic. All that he had seen was fraud, fraud, fraud. To him, anyone who, after the unmasking of so much faking in spiritualism, could still believe, was weak minded. He maintained that those things that had not been satisfactorily explained, were frauds that had escaped the eagle eye of the investigator.

"Then where is the weapon," and I returned anew to the difficulties that beset the theory of suicide.

Sullivan shook his head to signify that he did not know. "Probably in the museum," he added. "Anyway, the inspector's got that idea, and I was ordered to go over it again. I've fairly dug it out with a fine tooth comb, but they're not satisfied; I got to do it again. They won't rest on Oswald's death. Say, if you are detailed to this case, come on along. Once in a while you have an idea. Maybe you'll have another up there. Just the same, I'll bet anything that somewhere we are going to run across a word from the old man telling how he was going to take the trip. And the chances are, it is somewhere about the house."

I hastened to accept. "All right. When are you going?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. Can't get away before."

"I'll be there." Sent out on detail to this case, my hours were all the twenty-four. I could use them as

needed, either night or day, though normally I was on nights.

“And we’ll see if we can’t find how that ‘ghost’ got into and out of that bedroom,” finished Abe.

CHAPTER VII.

“M—E.”

J MARION OSWALD'S museum was a large room. How large I had not realized until Sullivan and I began to go over it.

“We won't get through today. I know! I've been over it before,” he remarked as we climbed the stairs following the butler who conceived it his duty to conduct us. Not that he could have let us in for, after the verdict was rendered, on the advice of the district attorney, the room had been locked by the police and they alone had the right of ingress and egress. Sullivan unlocked the door and we entered, the butler returning to the first floor.

“Do you know the size of this place,” Abe asked as we stood among the collections before beginning their study. I did not; he enlightened me. “Width, fifty-eight feet; length, one hundred and eight. Height, to the ceiling, fourteen feet. That hall,” and he pointed to the box at the top of the stairs, “measures fourteen feet on a side. Thus, this floor is all museum except for a fourteen foot cube that sticks into the room from the west side.”

There were fifteen windows on each of the long sides and seven in each end. Between these entrances for light were the cases with the specimens, each set the narrow way against the wall, the length projecting

into the room. This left a large opening down the center which was occupied by flat table cases and the mounted Snake Dance group, as well as several larger specimens.

"Boy, do you realize that we are on rather dangerous work," and Abe looked at me quizzically. "We are hunting for a deadly poison; we may find it, just as Oswald did. The weapon that made those two holes in his arm is somewhere around here. If you catch sight of anything that even looks as though it might have two needle points, you let it carefully alone and call me."

I wondered if he thought I was afraid. Me—one of the lads who rush in where coppers fear to tread. I said I would.

"Not that there is a chance of your finding anything. I tell you I went over this whole room with a compound microscope. And what did I find? Not one damn thing." Abe snorted in disgust. "Still—just your luck—you might stumble on to something."

Looking for a needle in a haystack is just such a task as we were undertaking; simple as can be. If the needle is there, and the hay is removed straw by straw, the implement will surely be found. But we were not sure that the needle was in our haystack; yet we had to exercise just as close care as if we knew it were.

Sullivan had the keys to all the cases and, one by one, we examined every article they contained. This he had not done on his previous search, contenting himself with ransacking the room. Tedious! Let anyone who loves detective work tackle a monotonous task such as this. Yet such is the work. We were at it three days. Every jar was examined as to contents, if

any; each solid article was gone over to see if by chance it might not be hollow or contain a secret cavity.

Result of all our efforts: nothing.

I myself couldn't see the need of all this. If the poison acted as rapidly as Jimmy said it did, J. Marion Oswald never could have used a weapon and then have concealed it. And if another had killed him, why should they conceal the curari or the tool, here? Why not carry both with them when they escaped? But Abe had orders to examine, and examine it was.

We were very careful in handling those arrows we knew were poisoned with curari, even though one of the first things the police had done, after testing them, was to clean the points of all weapons.

"Now if the old man had wanted to use it, here was his supply," Abe remarked as we came to the case. "He could easily have made a solution and doped himself with it."

"Then where is the two pointed dagger he used?"

"How do you know it had two points," Abe objected.

I didn't. Come to think of it, couldn't he have jabbed twice, or been struck twice in succession with a single needle?

"Well, it so happens that you are right," Abe continued. "The two punctures enter in so precisely the same direction, that there is practically no chance that two blows could have been given with a single weapon. So that is what I am looking for, a two-pointed tool. You don't suppose that his daughter could have removed it?"

"Certainly not," I asserted. The face of the girl as she voiced her protest, and offered to give a reward,

rose before me. Not by her hand had such a tool, had there been one, been removed.

“The maids—or the butler?”

I shook my head. “They could hardly have picked up and carried away an implement without their mistress seeing them, before I arrived. And nothing was removed after I entered; of that I am positive.” I went on along this line of thought while Abe unlocked another case. “But suppose that they had tried it. Think of the danger they were in. Two points fine enough to make the small holes you described at the inquest, would scratch at the slightest touch. No, they could not have taken it away. When Hoffman questioned them, they displayed no nervousness nor gave other evidence of trying to hide anything.”

“Then the thing is still here. He never had time to hide it, or even to throw it away. After that poison got into him, he never made a quick move. He might have tottered a step or two, but no more.”

Abe was still holding fast to his theory that it was suicide. Finished with the cases, we examined the objects displayed without covers. These included many weapons fastened up on the walls, chests and boxes, the Hopi snake dance group, the single suit of armor, several specimens of tapestry, and many other minor objects. I was particularly interested in the mounted rattlers.

“Here, Abe,” and I pointed to their open mouths with the fangs protruding, “are some weapons that would do it.”

Abe grunted. “How far do you think it is from this group to where the body was found?”

I estimated. “Twenty-five feet,” I said.

"Thirty-nine feet six inches," he gave as the true figures. "Do you suppose a man, stricken as he was, could walk that far? Yet testimony shows that he dropped at the other end of that big chest."

"But if he could have walked," I objected, "it is the very direction he'd take if he was on his way to the stairs. If he was after aid——"

"Yes, but that poison works terribly fast," Abe broke in. "We tried it on an old horse. The district attorney wasn't satisfied with Jimmy's statements; wanted to see it himself. Say, that horse rolled its eyes once, bent its knees, fell down, stretched out and was dead."

"There's another thing," he went on, pointing to the fangs in the largest rattler. "Notice those. That fellow is the biggest of those mounted here and those fangs are just an inch and an eighth apart. Remember how far I said those holes in Oswald's wrist were apart?"

I did. "An inch and a half," I told him.

"Then none of these fangs could have made the holes. Still, we were taking no chances. Scrapings were taken from these, but they developed no poison culture. A rattler kills by making the holes with his fangs as he strikes. Then he wiggles and presses until the fluid that is stored in the two sacs at the back of his head is forced into the holes. That does the killing. You might drive your hand against these fangs now and you'd be worse poisoned by the germs getting into the holes than by any poison that would come from the snake. Rattlesnake venom is far different from curari. Had Oswald got the full effect of a healthy, good-sized snake like this one," and he pointed to the largest,

“he’d be alive today. It would be hours before it began to work and long before that time a physician would have it neutralized.”

I paced slowly from the group to the end of the box farthest away, at which point Miss Oswald had first found her father. It was fifteen good, fair paces. A weak, or an old person, would have taken more. No, Oswald had never walked that distance after receiving the curari.

As we were beside the chest, Sullivan and I now gave it our attention. It was not as large, when I became more familiar with it, as I had judged it at my first impression. The figures, according to Sullivan, who measured everything, were: length, forty-five inches; height, thirty-two; width, thirty-six. It was peculiar in that there were no handles on either end. We shifted it out of the way, lifted it up, turned it over, but not a thing showed up either on the box, on the floor beneath, or the wall behind; except a little dust. Abe scraped up some of this, made a little packet, and put it in his pocket. “One can never tell,” he remarked. “This might show curari.”

The chest interested me mightily. It was bound round and round with copper strips, studded and bossed, so that very little wood was visible. The copper was handworked for the blows of a hammer were to be seen all over it. On the lid, copper bands crossed and recrossed entirely hiding the material beneath. The lock and hasp, of a crude and heavy design, also were of copper, handwrought. It was a peculiar piece of work to come out of a cave in Peru, associated with Inca remains.

“Looks more like European work,” I told Abe.

"Here's what the record shows," and he produced his notebook into which he had copied what Oswald had set down; for the chest had not yet been labelled. "Chest in copper; found in a cave near Urabamba, Peru, in November of 1917. Discoverer, Jesus Quintanilla, Indian. Secured by James Orth in 1918. Reported to have been associated with many bones."

Sullivan had gone over the chest outwardly in an endeavor to find rough, jagged edges, without result. Nor had I any better luck.

We opened it. It was a difficult performance. The chest was very old, the hinges creaked, but it was the hasp which presented the greatest difficulties. Before it flew up, one had to push the lower part down as hard as possible with the left hand while exerting great strength with the other on the upper part; to open it, one had to treat it with a tearing apart motion.

We found the interior bare; like the outside, it was lined and relined with copper strips. We tapped it all over trying to locate hollow spaces, but heard nothing suspicious. The raising and the lowering of the lid made a great din. It groaned and rumbled and squeaked. "We ought to oil the thing," observed Abe.

The tapestry that had hung back of the chest next engaged us. It had been rehung in its place. In size this relic, while the largest in the Oswald collection, was not so large as some of the same class I have seen, but it was lighter in color. It depicted tents, soldiers, men on horseback, in armor and on foot, with pikes and cross-bows, scattered all over a great field near the sea; over this field was spread a cloth, now a dingy yellow. Once, in all probability, it had been golden, but time and light had faded the brilliant hues. "Field of

the Cloth of Gold,” was the explanation given on the slip accompanying it.

We used a microscoposcope upon its threads and upon those of the few other and smaller tapestries in the room, but all were of simple, twisted fibers. No gilt or tinselled cords were interwoven. Ordinary thread cannot puncture the human skin; that freed the tapestries from complicity in Mr. Oswald’s taking off.

From article to article we moved until we reached the suit of armor. The original of “The Skeleton in Armor,” according to the butler; also, by inference from the label which it bore, which recited the locality and the period, leaving no doubt as to what Mr. Oswald believed. Abe saw nothing incongruous in this. Anyone who might believe in a medium calling down a spirit was, according to his theory, not up to par, mentally. Yet he saw nothing in a grown man accepting this little fiction; he could see no lack of intelligence because he could not see the fallacy. How weak we are in things outside the ordinary walks of our daily lives.

The armor was mounted, and were one looking for points, jagged ends, or lancelets, here could they be found. The suit was rusted and broken. Gaps and rents showed in every part. Here were plenty of needle-points the inch and a half apart required by Abe.

These, too, had been subjected to close scrutiny and to tests for their nocuous or innocuous character. Nothing had been found.

On the third day we also examined the Tuscan amphora, and the Aleut halibut hooks. These were newly secured articles and Abe furnished their descrip-

tions from his note-book. They, too, had nothing to reveal.

The fourth day we returned to work carefully over the floor. Something might have dropped and gone under a case. Or some grains of curari might drop into the dust near a wall. The sample Sullivan had taken from beneath the chest, had given negative results when placed in Jimmy's hands. We had little hope of finding anything, but Abe was working under orders. We moved all the cases, and everything else that was movable; samples of dust found beneath these objects were carefully taken and labelled. But we had little hope. Nor were ours realized; nothing was found.

When we had finished with the museum, we were prepared to swear that the implement which had caused the death of J. Marion Oswald was not to be found within its walls. Nor had we found any trace of the paper from which the corner had been torn. Abe still was dogmatic for a verdict of suicide; but not I.

That there had been a paper from which the corner I had picked up, had been torn, there could be no doubt. The chances were immensely in favor of its having been within the walls of the museum at the time J. Marion died. As for a weapon with two sharp points, that just as certainly had been there. Both were now gone. The paper might have blown away, had there been a chance; but that could not have happened to an implement of sufficient weight and strength to make the two punctures. If these had not been removed by natural agencies, what remained save that of a human who carried them off? The logical one to suspect of spiriting them away was the murderer. The chief was right when he said, "Find the murderer."

Only I wasn't progressing in that direction at any great rate of speed.

Having completed our labor in the museum, Abe and I went down to inspect the room where Deborah had materialized. I now met Miss Oswald, the first time I had seen her since the inquest. She smiled faintly as she greeted me and asked why I had not called upon her. I didn't tell her the truth; I again promised that I would soon,—just as soon as the press of work let up. She inquired as to how our quest was progressing and Abe told her of our painstaking search and of its net results. She at once saw the strength of the probabilities that the one who had killed her father had taken away the weapon and the sheet of paper. I do believe that it cheered her up. In this way, I mean.

Here is the poor girl at home, alone brooding over her father's death. No matter how deeply she believed that he could not have made away with himself, that fear must arise to plague her, again and again. So, just to be able to think that the evidence, negative though it was, pointed the other way from suicide, was some comfort.

Abe explained that we wished to see the rooms where the materialization had taken place, and she herself accompanied us, pointing out the position occupied by herself and father, and the point at which the figure appeared. It was not in front, but a bit to our right, of the doorway.

“Was the door always shut while you were working,” Sullivan asked.

“Working?” Miss Oswald looked at the detective, then in a puzzled way, turned to me.

“I mean while you were trying to raise the spirit,”

he explained before I could answer her unspoken question.

"Sometimes it was open, sometimes shut," she told us. "It made no difference; we paid no attention to it."

"How did she come? Suddenly?"

"As I explained before," Miss Oswald patiently replied, "sometimes she did not come at all. I remember very well her first appearance. Though I cannot now recall all the tests father made to bring her, I do know that he began the first successful attempt by rapping upon a small table at his right. We sat here," and she pointed. "After once having succeeded, the method was the same, always. He would rap; after a certain length of time the taps were answered from the air somewhere above our heads. Shortly, Deborah would appear. Father had a peculiar way of rapping. After that first coming, he always used it, and it only. It went like this," and she tapped lightly on the table near the wall.

"Tap, tap," pause, "tp." The first two were long and slow, the last one quick and jerky. "Tap, tap," pause, "tp," she repeated it again; "tap, tap," pause, "tp." The last one was decidedly staccato.

Abe was greatly interested. He listened with the closest attention. "Did the spirit answer with regular taps?" he desired to be informed.

"No. Sometimes there were several raps one after another that seemed to come from all parts of the room above us; at others, they all came from just above father. There never was any rhythmical sequence in the sounds."

At her request we entered the room which for years had been her father's sleeping apartment and found it

just as described at the inquest by the butler. There were but two doors; the only one which gave into an apartment opening into the main part of the house was the one through which we stepped. The other opened into the bathroom; this was barren save for the customary appliances.

No closet was used for Mr. Oswald's clothes. Instead, a large walnut case, with huge doors, stood in a corner. It was one of the oldtime corner cupboards; that is, it was built in a triangular shape, the two right-angled sides fitting the walls in a corner, while the third side, the hypotenuse, contained the doors. Abe asked permission to search, which was willingly accorded; and search he did. Miss Oswald and I withdrew to the study, where we sat and chatted while he went over every inch of the bathroom and of the sleeping chamber. The corner closet did not escape him. He scrutinized it, sounding every board. He tried to pull it out, but it was fastened to the wall. From my seat I could see nearly everything he did. Yet for all his careful examination he found not a thing.

I was in no hurry for him to finish. He might have crawled, pried, peeped and pounded over the room all the rest of the day and evening; I would not have minded. When we left the house that afternoon, one of us went with a firm determination to return again shortly; and that one was not Abe.

As we stepped out of the vestibule, he suggested that before departing, we walk around the house. The distance was rather great, for the house was large. At only one point did Sullivan pause. While we were pacing along the south side of the residence, he stopped when we came opposite Mr. Oswald's bedroom. The

two windows were identified readily. The room was a large one, occupying fully one-half the width of the house at this end. In the center of this south wall, the chimney was located, running straight up the full height without a break. It projected eight feet from the main wall and was twelve feet in width. Abe measured it.

As we walked away after completing the circuit, Sullivan looked at me and grinned.

"You missed something, young man," and he laughed aloud.

I was chagrined. I supposed that he meant that while I was talking with Isobel Oswald, he had discovered something.

"What did you find that was worth knowing? Nothing of any great value, I'll bet. So you might as well let me in on it now. I'll get it later, anyway, old man." We were passing a drugstore and recalling Abe's love for cigars I invited him in. "Come on in. I'll buy." He accepted.

When he had selected a good one of a well-known brand, had lighted up and we were again on our way, he returned to the subject.

"In regard to what I found, you saw and heard it as well as I. Why tell you what you heard?"

"Tell that to someone ready to believe it," I chaffed. I didn't think any such thing could be possible. If it were then I would be dumbfounded. Abe Sullivan, one of the city's detective force had got something that got by a news man! Then had my sheet better dispense with the services of us fellows and hire the city detectives as newswriters.

“Don’t string us any more, Abe.” I was doubtful about his having anything to reveal. “What was it?”

Abe was good enough to comply with my request for information.

“You heard the knocks the old man gave. What do you suppose he was doing?”

“Calling Deborah,” I answered, though I knew that Abe never would have asked had he wanted that answer; yet I also realized that he would expect those very words.

“Hardly. The old boy was telegraphing. Every little while I look for some of these matters wriggling around beneath the surface of this case to bob up and appear on the surface.”

“Telegraphing!” It began to percolate through the interstices of my cranium that those taps were very regular, and were regularly repeated. But I had never learned the Morse code; Abe had the start of me there.

“Telegraphing? Who was he calling? What was he sending,” I asked.

“Who—yes, who was he sending to? What he was sending is different. If I’ve got it right, over and over he was calling, ‘M—e,’ ‘M—e.’ ”

“‘M—e’? Well, that spells ‘me.’ ”

CHAPTER VIII.

CONSCIENCE VS. REASON.

AS I sat thinking it over that night, I realized this: For all we had spent a week at the Oswald home, we had got nowhere. As I analyzed what we had done and what we had found out, I could see but a slight step in advance taken. All we could say was that we were a little more certain in our facts, a trifle more sure that what few things we did know were true.

But we knew almost nothing. In addition to the poison, the paper and the apparition, we had added but one thing to our store of knowledge and that was of doubtful value. This was what Miss Oswald had told us during our interview with her.

Her father had developed a custom of calling the spirit with a peculiar set of raps. These Abe recognized as part of the Morse code, an idea which occurred to neither Miss Oswald nor myself. He was telegraphing two letters, "m" and "e."

But did he know that he was sending "m" and "e"? There was always the possibility that the old gentleman had stumbled into the Morse code quite by accident. The raps were such as anyone might use; that they happened to represent "m" and "e" as worked out by the earliest telegrapher, was no indication that this was known to Mr. Oswald, any more than it was to his daughter. For "m" the code is two long dashes,

and for "e" a short dash. Used as a rap, they would work equally as well. But, wholly without intending to use them as Morse code letters, anyone might just happen to use those very knocks.

On the other hand, the "m" and "e" spelled "me," and he might have called that over and over again as a signal to the spirit that it was he who was calling. It was ungrammatical, but it might have been, or have come to be understood over there, as a code signal meaning that J. Marion Oswald wished to communicate with Deborah. When one steps into the psychic, the problems presented do not find easy solution by theories laid down in this life. Thus, Mr. Oswald might have used it purposely, or accidentally.

There was another hypothesis that had to be considered. Might it not be someone's initials he was using to call them? Neither "M" nor "E" was the beginning of the name Deborah; but how did we know that Deborah was her right name? Might it not be assumed by the spirit and Mr. Oswald to hide something from the daughter? This, perhaps, was far fetched, but it had to be taken into consideration.

Might not the "M. E." be someone whom Mr. Oswald had known years ago, and with whom he had become intimate? It was worth looking into. "Get someone; get them to talk," was as wise a thing as I ever knew the police to do.

It is all right to find a torn glove, trace it to the buyer, run him down and examine one of his shirts, find a stain on the collar, discover that it is blood, and arrest him with, "You are the man." But, nine times out of ten, unless he comes across with a confession,

the jury will not convict. No, make them talk, say police circles.

If criminals did not have sweethearts and the sweethearts did not have tongues, our prisons would not be half so full as they are.

Now I felt that there was someone in this affair who would talk if we could reach him. But when you approach the life of a man like J. Marion Oswald, the circle is huge and includes such hosts of people that in a case of this kind, it could only be by luck that the right one would be reached. Another difficulty lay in the fact that the information anyone might have would appear of no use to them. Without knowing all the ins and outs of the death, they would never conceive that a name they held might possibly be the key that would unlock the mystery. Apparently, it might have no actual connection with his murder but if secured, it might unlock the doors to more, and still more, information, and eventually solve the question.

His daughter and the servants knew much, but did they know the one thing we were looking for? The chances were against it. In fact, they knew too much. Their minds were crowded with such a wealth of detail that to expect them to pick out a pertinent fact, if indeed they had it, was asking too much.

But perhaps they would recall someone with the initials "M. E." There was also a factor outside of friends which might have furnished a "M. E." This was a class, who up to very recent times, had little cause to love him; they were the thousands who had been in his employ in one capacity or another. Among them were probably many "M. E.'s." Yet it wouldn't

be such a task to try them all. At least, it was not impossible of accomplishment.

Next day I got in touch with Abe and we talked over various methods of finding such a person, if he existed. With a plan of action agreed upon, we started our quest. He was to go to the general offices of the Oswald enterprises to discover how many "M. E.'s" were on record. For me the task of calling upon Isobel Oswald to find if, among those she had known, or her father had known, or of whom he spoke, there was anyone whose given name began with the tenth letter of the alphabet and whose surname with the fifth.

It was a task. I felt, that other day when I met her, how much it might mean to me to be at her side and to talk with her; but away from the sight of her sweet face, the thought of Stitmore Tithes would come up. And my anger would rise. To give her, a beautiful young creature, to an old man like Tithes! Old, with all it connotes in a single man in Chicago. How many men, unmarried at fifty, have lived clean? And to turn her over to him! She could not love him, a man many years her senior. And for a young girl to go to a man she did not love. Perhaps my aunt, who brought me up, laid too much stress on moral cleanliness. But thanks to her, a marriage to me meant love.

But what could the marriage of Isobel Oswald and Stitmore Tithes mean to me? Nothing. Stop thinking about what is no concern of yours, said I to myself. Go get what additional information she may have to give. But I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be near her, I told myself. Yet, hour by hour, I was looking forward to seeing her again.

Abe came around to see me on Friday morning. He

had spent the whole of one day at the offices of the Oswald Companies and had then run out to the plant. He had results.

"Did I find any 'M. E.'s? Say, did I? The woods are full of them. At the office I got on track of seventy-three individuals all having a last name beginning with an E whose first name began with M. At that, I went back only twenty-five years; the seventy-three are on the records as having worked there since that time. At the factories I couldn't go so far back into the past; the earlier records were gone. But among those who have toiled there within the last fifteen years, I gathered in only five hundred and forty-two names. Why, it looks among the foreigners, especially, as though every other man's last name began with an E. Just look at this list, will you! I had four girls they loaned me at the plant, helping copy these," and he tossed a bundle of sheets on the table.

At the head of the line stood Melchisedek Eabling and down at the end was Marduzzi Ezzioli. In between—well, it certainly was a hodgepodge. Yet in that list might lie the key we sought.

"Cheer up, Abe," I laughed, as he sank down in my big chair. "This isn't so bad. Rather comb Chicago's three millions for the murderer? Why, you've only six hundred and fifteen to look up here. Easy money! Go to it, old man. You have my blessing."

There was the possibility of a germ of great value in his work unless his lists failed to go back far enough. I feared that they did not. Now, had I done the inquiring, I would have made a start with the date when J. Marion as a young man actively entered the busi-

ness, and brought it down to within ten or fifteen years of the present time.

Men, when they reach the age of sixty-five and seventy, are past the time when their acts are going to bring some individual in a rage about their ears. Old men may receive mass condemnation for acts affecting the social welfare; but rare indeed is that septuagenarian who, by his personal deeds, arouses another to thoughts of revenge upon him. So I felt, had Abe planned to confine his inquiries more closely to the younger days of J. Marion Oswald, we might have been more certain of results. But perhaps he could not; business firms are few and far between, who retain all the lists of men who have worked for them at various times.

Sullivan wanted to know how I had made out. He was greatly surprised when he heard I had not gone. I explained as well as I could that social amenities were averse to such rapidity in making calls. To be invited one day to call the next might go in his circle, but there was considerable difference in procedure in the social order which claimed Miss Oswald as its own. Abe grunted. I believe he saw through my pretense. I wanted to groan, but for a different reason. I had made an appointment yesterday to call the following evening, I told him. That was tonight. Abe departed.

Tonight I dressed with trembling. All the way to the Oswald home, I trembled. As I stepped out of the taxi I felt a great need of something to lean up against.

Then I came to myself. Why on earth was I acting like a kid schoolboy going to call on his first sweetheart? One would think I was going to make love to Isobel Oswald. Oh, yes, a reporter on the common

press going to offer his heart and hand and hall bedroom to an heiress with millions in her own right; and she already safely engaged to the man favored by her father. Brace up, you poor fool, and walk along!

There was another thing that bothered me. I was supposed to take advantage of her in this way: under the guise of a call, I was to try and worm more facts from her concerning the death of her father. Abe supposed that I would; he saw nothing unethical in it. Well, maybe I would; and then maybe I would not.

Tasker answered my ring; took me in, took my hat and coat, and ushered me into the reception room. In a moment he came back, saying Miss Oswald asked me to come to her own drawing-room.

I was still trembling, yet in a moment more I was bending over her hand saying some soft nothing about the evening or the weather. Her room was small; a cheerful fire glowed on the hearth. The lights in pink shades threw a warm, cozy glow about us. She gave me a chair at one side of the fire and herself took one opposite.

We talked, heaven knows about what. I wonder if I wandered in my replies for I cannot recall half the things we discussed. Isobel Oswald was no child. She was nearly thirty years of age, with a mind matured by travel and by association with the world's foremost men.

She was lovely. The softness of her expression, the tenderness of her glance and the melody of her voice—how can a woman be so beautiful! Oh, for the good old days when men fought one another and died gladly for a smile from their ladylove!

We talked of many things, yet uppermost in the

thoughts of both of us was the tragedy that had first made us known to each other. I asked no questions. Not for the world, at least on such an evening, would I intentionally pry into the past, even though such prying might not touch her great and loving soul. For she had loved her father, and she was lonesome; no one can know how lonesome such a loss makes the loser, unless they, too, have lost. A soul hunger—yes, I know it; I am alone, my life has been alone.

Since a little lad I have never known father or mother; and if I can feel this loneliness, never having experienced the joy of a cherishing love, save my aunt's, what must Isobel Oswald's have been!

I longed to offer her comfort; but how can one? Tell humorous stories? We of the press get the cream of such tales. Well, I could not, nor did I know the propriety of such a course. So we talked and talked.

Something either Abe or I did on our visit must have given her the impression that we doubted her tale of the apparition, for suddenly after a pause during which she looked into the fire and I looked—well, I should have looked into the fire, too, but did not—she turned to me.

“You do not believe in ghosts, or the return of the dead from the other side, do you, Mr. Bowen?”

I was startled, yet I managed to gather my wits together and replied.

“Miss Oswald, I truthfully can say that I do. That you may know of the sincerity of my declarations, let me tell you of the woman whose love was so great that she could not rest in her grave but came back to comfort her husband,” and I told her the story of the episode of the trunk and the love that never died.

"So you see, Miss Oswald, that at first hand I have proof of the coming back of those who pass on."

"How she must have loved him," she said softly, her eyes shining.

"Yes." Then I added, "And for such a love as that I'd give all the world, if I had it, except that love," and I meant every word of it. No one, except we poor dubs who drive through life alone, can realize the craving we have to love and be loved. But I was upon dangerous ground and I hurriedly switched back.

I had mentioned Cyrus Herron in the story and she was interested; so I told her more of my friend's work. "You see, Miss Oswald, that there are many fakes and frauds in psychic work." Cyrus Herron and I had solved the mystery of many ghostly happenings; he did the solving, I went along. I explained this to her.

"Then he works on mysteries other than the purely psychic," she exclaimed.

"Not exactly. That isn't his work. It at least has to appear to be of psychic origin."

"Do you know, I greatly fear," she confided, turning her large eyes up to mine, "that the coroner and the police are set upon proving father a suicide. I know that he was not."

That was putting it a little strong. If she *knew*—but she did not actually *know* any more than I did, I told myself. Under the stress of her emotion she but affirmed what her knowledge of her father made here certain was the truth.

"Then we must find his murderer," and I sighed for that began to look like a hopeless task.

"Why the sigh, Mr. Bowen?" and she smiled across at me.

"Because," and I told just what I thought, "we are going to have the time of our lives doing it. Anyone brainy enough to dare to attack a man as powerful as your father has plenty of gray matter. His tracks will be well covered."

"But suppose, Mr. Bowen, that it was some one from the other world? If they can love, then can hate; and they know how to love. Some one may have come back—" She hesitated and looked down.

"Yes," I thought; "came back, secured the curari and a spiked tool, and sent Mr. Oswald out. If they come back in spirit, why not bring spirit weapons and poisons, and kill that way. Yes, and who knows but what they do." Aloud I said, "But you cannot believe that?"

"I do not know what to think. It does not seem that it could have been an accident; yet I do know that he did not do it himself. And I cannot see how any one could have gone to the museum in broad daylight, killed father without his making a sound, and then escaped without some one of us about the house seeing him. If none of these things happend, what remains excepting the spirit world?"

The poor girl had been working with her father on psychic phenomena so long that anything not readily explained she referred to some cause outside the earthly plane.

"You don't think Deborah had a hand in it?" I queried.

"Oh, no," quickly. "She had the kindest voice and she loved us. Sometimes when she spoke I thought I heard father in her speech; so much did she care for us that she took on some of our characteristics."

She did? This was getting interesting. She went on.

"And she warned us many times, too. Once she saved father thousands in a stock deal he had undertaken. Again, one night when I had the croup—oh, yes, even at my age—," and she blushed prettily, "she came and told father what to do."

So the visitant from the other world did do some good, knew what was going on and how to act as a doctor, at a pinch. With such sublime faith as that I could not hint at the doubts Abe and I entertained.

"I want to ask you one question, Miss Oswald." She smilingly told me to proceed. "How did you know her name was Deborah?"

"Oh, father recognized her. He said that she was some one he had known long ago, and to call her Deborah. He told me that I had never known her; so we never discussed her life on this plane."

It certainly began to look as though Mr. Oswald himself had held all the strings we were trying to reach, and had taken the ends with him to his grave. So he had known Deborah! I decided that now was a good time to ask if she knew any one with initials M. E. No, she did not, but why did I ask? I had gone so far; I took another step.

"Miss Oswald, you remember those taps your father used in calling up the apparition?"

"Oh, yes. I told you of them the other day. They were these," and she repeated them.

"Did you know that these represent 'M' and 'E' in the Morse telegraphic code?"

She sat for some moments without replying. Yet I could see that what I had told her was news. When she raised her eyes to mine, she had determined this

had been unknown to her father. If any one, she should know. What she said was, "No, not 'represent,' for we did not know that they were what you say. They may by chance stand for the same letters, but we were not using them in that sense." Her voice was earnest as she continued. "Why, I didn't tell you, but I think I invented them myself. Father tried all sorts of combinations, and I assisted by giving variations on his raps. That series, those that finally brought Deborah, seemed to synchronize more easily and naturally, and we used them many times before she made her first appearance. For it did not bring her the first time we used this set, by any means. So you see that there is nothing in the 'M. E.' after all."

I saw, but I wasn't so sure that there was nothing in the use of those letters. And what seemed conclusive to her, was that though she tried during the remainder of the evening to think of a single person known to her father, with those initials, she failed to recall anyone. Of course it was reasonable that if her father knew no one who was "M. E." he would not attempt to call them up.

"You remember," her melodious tones flowed on, "how I told that father feared the message, 'Do not forget, Marion; before it is too late, repent,' had a warning for him that presaged his death. He was right, as we now know. But another somewhat curious thing happened a month ago. I would not mention it, and it may be of no moment, anyhow, if it were not that father's death is so mysterious. One noon father received a special delivery letter here at the house. Father always had all his mail go down to the office where his secretary attended to everything. But this

noon, so he told me later, those at the post-office who had father's order and knew what to do with his mail, were gone. Some inexperienced employee sent the boy up here with the letter. Tasker took it and brought it to father. He opened it and gave a little start. But he said nothing about what was in it. I supposed that it was a business communication, and it may have been. I did not ask; so I do not now know. He was very absent-minded during the rest of the meal and once I saw a tear roll down beside his nose. But I am not sure this was of any importance; doubtless, it was not."

I did not agree with her, but I did not tell her so. "Indeed, Miss Oswald, it would seem that you are right. One can always pick out a number of little things, each one slight in itself, which if considered together, seem to point to some untoward development. Yet these little things may have no connection with his death."

"I did not know if they were of moment or not, but I have set my whole heart on having him freed of even a breath of suspicion of having made way with himself, and I want to give every possible assistance. I am so glad that I can tell you these things and that you will tell me what you think. There was one thing more. Some days later, one afternoon, as we were talking over the questions to ask Deborah at the next séance, father suddenly looked across at me and asked, 'Bella, do you believe ghosts can kill?' I answered, 'Of course not,' and wanted to know why he asked such a question. He passed it off with light word and I thought little of it. Father had a most unusual mind, one that always was wandering out of beaten paths; I was familiar with such queries."

"You are sure he used the word 'ghosts,' not 'spirits,' " I asked her.

"Yes, I am certain; in his psychic studies he almost never made use of the former term; so I noticed it particularly."

"That makes it seem odd to me. It is a question if he was not referring to 'ghosts' in his past life."

"Oh, it couldn't have been that," expostulated the girl. "Father was too kind and too just to have anything like that on his mind. A lot of men who tried to get the better of him and who failed have made father out to be a conscienceless scoundrel whose only love was money. I know this is false. I knew him better than anyone else, and he was the soul of honor," and while there was a touch of tears, her voice rang with her faith.

Larry, Larry, me boy, why couldn't you win the love of a woman like that? What would not life mean to you! But that need not make me insane with love for Miss Oswald. Yet it was all that I could do to refrain from putting my arms around her and drawing her to me as I took my leave. Every fiber of my being ached with the longing for the colleen. Yet quietly, as though such thought I never had entertained, I bade her "Good-night." With her "Good-bye," she included an invitation to call again and added that she was always at home on Friday evenings.

As I walked homeward and turned over in my mind the events of the evening, it suddenly dawned upon me that I had not even hinted at the one thing she had requested me to discuss. We had made no mention of her proposed offer of a reward. I had forgotten it entirely.

I went homeward on foot. For I wanted to think. And every step of the miles made plainer to me the impossible course I was pursuing.

Arrived at home, I had a great session with myself. You damned scoundrel, I thought, what are you thinking of? You, a penniless beggar, daring to fall in love with that scion of a modern aristocracy! Shame on you! Why, your last year's earning would not buy one of her dresses. Conscience laid me out on the coals.

Yet always my longing came back. Reason hotly engaged conscience. What is this thing that stands between you and your love? Reason asked; then answered, Money, always money. Damn money! It isn't anything. Now birth. You are of as good birth as is she. The blood of Irish kings flows in your veins.

And the blood of a greater modern king, a monarch of the business world, in hers, argued Conscience.

But, rejoined Reason, You have lived straight and clean. Have you not as much right to try to win her love as has any other man?

Would the old Irish kings have looked on with satisfaction at the wedding of their daughter to a serf of their realm, Conscience threw back. Would you, had you been there, have given your sister to such a one? In modern days you who are tied to the wheels of life, are the serfs; those who give you your daily bread, who rule your lives, are the kings. What would the world think and say to your marriage with her? You know; see it, see it: "He married her for her fortune."

And Stitmore Tithes, went on Conscience. How about him? Is it fair to try in an underhand manner to steal away his betrothed?

Yes, Reason answered, If she does not love him and

you can win her; he has never had her love; you might rouse it.

But for what, insisted Conscience. You, in your position, dare not offer her marriage. Better keep away from her, it warned.

Good advice, admitted Reason. Follow it.

CHAPTER IX.

I LOSE THE BATTLE.

NEXT morning I was firm in my determination never to call on Isobel Oswald again. For her sake, yes, and for mine, I would stop right where I was. It should be the end of my folly.

Abe was in his office when I went in next day. He was expecting me.

"What did you find out?" was his greeting. Sullivan knew I would do as I had promised; he knew me better than I did myself.

"Nothing," I snorted. I was angry; at Abe, myself, the world. "She doesn't know any M. E."

"Well, the firm's books more than make up for her deficiency. I've run down about a dozen of them. Johnny Bulls, Frenchies, Irish, and some others and none of them even got within seeing distance of old J. Marion. Twelve out of six hundred and fifteen leave me only six hundred and three yet to investigate. Say, we'll all be dead and buried like Oswald, before we get to the end of those names."

I laughed. I knew, and the detective bureau knows, that Abe Sullivan is strong on detail work. Once started, he'd work through that list from Eab to Ezz, or until he found that for which he was searching. One gets results that way, too, but it is slow. My inclination would have been to jump around on the lists and work by elimination.

After he had delivered his pronunciamento, I told Abe about Miss Oswald's fear that a ghostly enemy had come down and killed her parent.

"Damn rubbish," swore Abe. "What with brainstorms, the unwritten law, and self-defense, we're having the devil of a job to convict the criminals we catch. Let some lawyer run in this ghost stuff and it is all off. If the spirits from another world come over here, commit murder, and then go back to their own place where they can't be jailed for what they do over here, we might just as well shut up shop. Rubbish, all rubbish!"

I expressed to him what she had told me about her father's asking her if she believed ghosts could kill. Sullivan thought little of it. I then mentioned the letter Mr. Oswald had received which had so disturbed him. Abe was interested now. After some one who could be persuaded to talk, he most favored letters. They tell so much; often far more than the writer intended.

He noted the approximate date on which it was received, and such other details as I could supply, and said that next morning he'd make it his business to go through the record book of the branch office that had delivered the letter. This would give him the exact date, and with this, Mr. Oswald's files should yield the information sought. If the letter was a business one, well and good; if not, we'd soon know what it was that perturbed J. Marion Oswald.

It also interested Abe to know that Deborah had been known to Mr. Oswald. This line of investigation was closed to us at present. Unless some one of his few old friends who were left, should recall Deborah,

it looked as though Isobel's father had carried the knowledge to the grave with him.

But we were moving forward a little. We now had three possible sources of information: The special delivery letter if it could be found; the woman Deborah, if indeed the spirit went by that name here; and the M. E.'s Abe was working on.

Monday morning found me still holding to my resolutions; Tuesday I had as bad a case of blues as ever struck me; and by Wednesday night I had thrown resolutions and all overboard. I but counted the days and hours until Friday evening should come. And then—when I went back to my rooms on Friday morning after going out to get breakfast, there on my table, where the landlady had placed it, lay a dainty missive. It had come by messenger. Did I know from whom it was? Well, had it been from anyone else there would have been an earthquake in those chambers.

It was from her. How she had discovered my address I do not know, as I had not told her where I roomed. "Will you please call this evening? There is a matter I wish to discuss with you. Isobel Oswald." It bore the date of this very morning. Would I accept this invitation? Though I well knew that for all days to come I might be preparing a hell for myself, the few moments of heaven I could snatch while in her company should be mine.

Late in the afternoon I ran around to Abe's office to see how he was getting on. I found him in the dumps; he was downhearted about the ultimate success of solving the problem.

"Everything about this case that we touch leads up

a blind alley," he complained, as he drew out the inevitable consoler and lighted up.

"What's the matter, didn't they have a record of the special delivery letter at the branch office?"

"Sure they did. And they remembered that letter all right, too. Some one got the merry hades for sending it up to Oswald's house. It never could happen again."

"Couldn't you trace the letter, then?"

"No. I got the date all right and went to Oswald's office. The secretary was willing to help, but he had never seen it. We went through every file looking at every letter that bore that date, or for several days previous. And in the whole lot there wasn't one that would make the old man's heart give a single extra thump. But the secretary did say that there were a very few letters he was told never to open. They were peculiarly marked, four tiny crosses, he said, three in a triangle and the other in the middle of it. He does not know if these letters were put in the files or not, but he thinks not. If they were not, then old Oswald had them. Find out from Miss Oswald if he kept any letters around the house, or if there was anything in his house safe that she didn't know about. Probably all those letters are together, unless he destroyed them. And that would be just like him. I'll bet we never see them."

I tried to cheer him up with references to some of the other cases he had solved and some of the fine work he had done in the past. For Abe Sullivan had a long list of successes to his credit, with very few failures. But he didn't cheer appreciably. This case left us with nothing much to work on. Here we had been

going over it for more than five weeks, and still we had not even a certain knowledge as to whether it was a crime or an accident. No wonder Abe was peevish and discouraged.

Eight-thirty that evening found me at the Oswald door; Miss Oswald received me in the same room. She was as royally attractive as ever; my prayers went up that forever and ever I might sit beneath her smile and listen to the melody of her voice.

Men sing of the beauty of the women of the South, of the sturdy figures of the women of the North. Sturdiness postulates strength, and strength one cannot always escape; the effects may be unpleasant. The loveliness of the southland connotes the fragile; it fades and withers; and even fresh, like a diet of confections, may pall. The voice alone is every changing; ever new, yet ever the same. As the coarse raucous tones of strength repel, so the shrill, high-pitched voice of the Southern beauty must grow wearing. But to the deep contralto, with the music of ages running through it, one might listen forever and forever, with only a heartache when it ceased. And such was the voice of Isobel Oswald.

We sat down and fell to chatting. It was some little time before she saw fit to explain what she wanted to see me about. She, too, was dissatisfied with the progress being made, even as was I, and thought that if she offered a reward of sufficient size, it might stir things up. She reminded me that she had tried to offer it before, but had been deterred by the action of the coroner. I also recalled, though I did not mention it, that I had called on a previous occasion to discuss this

very matter. She seemed to have forgotten it for she went on.

“It is no reflection on you, Mr. Bowen. You have discovered most of the evidence thus far brought forth. You found the slip of paper that bore the letters. And you have proved that my father was not a suicide. But matters are not progressing rapidly. Would not an offer of a liberal reward bring in information from others?”

She certainly was liberal with her praise. I knew that I had done nothing, yet she attributed to me all that little that seemed to have been accomplished. It was hard on Abe because I had been lucky enough to pick up the corner of the paper, to give me the credit for everything that was done—when, in fact, nothing had been done that even hinted at a solution.

“No, Miss Oswald,” I replied after thinking it over for a few moments. “At this stage of our investigations I do not think it advisable. I doubt if an offer of a reward for information would result as you desire. No doubt it would bring in much material, but most of it would be guesswork, surmise, distorted truth. And we are in about as unfavorable a position as possible at present; we need no more blind alleys to muddle us. You see, an offer such as you contemplate gives everyone a chance to get wealth, with no more effort than making a guess. Any one who comes forward with an alleged fact, has hopes that his theory, or guess, may solve the problem. And it may. He has everything to gain and nothing to lose. Suppose you went ahead and posted a reward. What will you ask for? We do not yet know what we would find. What sort of person was the murderer? Man or woman? Black or white? Tall

or short? About the best we could do would be to put out a request for information that would lead to the apprehension of the murderer of your father. And that is too indefinite. Have you spoken to Mr. Tithes about it?"

This was the first time his name had been mentioned between us. She neither blushed nor was in any way embarrassed. She shook her head.

"I have not consulted him on the matter. The last time we spoke of it was on the day of the inquest."

The last time they had spoken of it? Had she not seen him since that time? I wondered; my heart beat more quickly. I noticed, too, that she was wearing no ring.

"If you think it an unwise plan, I will abandon it for the present," she continued. "Why not call in your friend Dr. Herron? He should be interested when it is a question if your father did not go to his death through some revengeful wraith from the spirit world."

I had wished more than once that Cyrus Herron were here. In my talk with her on the previous evening, I had painted his exploits in the glowing colors they deserved. Cyrus Herron was the investigating agent for the International Psychic Society. His was the task of investigating the remarkable cases, news of which kept flowing in upon the bureau, that were located in America. Haunted houses, ghosts of all descriptions, extraordinary mediumistic work, telepathy, teleaudience, any and all psychic phenomena were the field of his work.

He had been very successful; had discovered many frauds, yet had certified to many other cases as being of a nature unexplainable on the normal basis. Per-

haps these might be reckoned against him as failures, for he did not solve the mysteries.

The association I had with him had made me his enthusiastic friend; in the stories of the work he did, I gave him his just due. There had been no failure then, and Miss Oswald evidently thought that he would not fail now.

But would he come? I could only find out by asking, and before I left I had worked out a plan to have him begin, if he did come. I was to write him that night. She insisted on offering him pay for his service, if he came. This spoiled the latter part of my evening. I was forgetting her wealth, her position, everything save that we were man and woman; she a woman to be loved, to be won. But that mention of money gave me a chill. I went away without asking about the missing letters.

As I bade her good-night, and Tasker showed me to the door, I dropped lower and lower into the pit. With the sonorous clang of its closing, despondency rose up from his lair and settled himself cross-legged upon my shoulders. I felt like walking east across Sheridan Road, and keeping straight on.

I wrote to Herron, as I promised, and in four days received a reply from the secretary of the Society stating that he was at present in Florida investigating an apparition that was said to feed on negro babies. My letter was being forwarded to him there.

The holiday season came and went. Christmas was on a Friday and I dared not call at the Oswald House; I spent the day mooning in my room. Nor had I the heart to visit Miss Oswald the following Friday, New Year's Day. Doubtless the poor girl would be receiv-

ing hosts of her social friends; though it might have been that because of her recent bereavement she was alone, friends not caring to intrude on her season of mourning. But I could not go. I dared not run the risk of meeting others there on that night. I, too, should have respected her season of grief; but somehow, I thought that she was lonely; and just to have in an insignificant news writer might help to cheer her. Oh, I had dozens of good excuses why I should go; yet I stayed away for three weeks.

Before the next Friday rolled round, I had received a reply from Herron. He wrote that he would be unable to give us much assistance, as he had his hands full just now looking after the Society's cases. However, he had to pass through Chicago, shortly, and would stop off for a day.

The police were letting up on the case somewhat. What could they do? They had nothing to work on; not a soul could be found against whom breathed even the faintest breath of suspicion. Abe still ground away at his grist of names on the list without finding a tangible suspect. Inquiries among such few old acquaintances of Mr. Oswald as I was able to reach, failed to show any Deborah, or anyone with the initials M. E. I began to believe that Miss Oswald was right and that the taps were wholly accidental. Abe was disgusted, and said so in some very flowery language. He said he knew we were on a false trail.

I went in to see the chief. He was mighty good about it, said he'd leave it to me. Keep on if I thought I saw a gleam of light anywhere, for if we solved it, it would be the biggest thing the News had ever pulled off. But do as I thought best. I struck him for a

substantial increase. Here was I, thirty-two, with hardly a dollar to my name. I had lived it up as it came. Now the possibility that a man might marry was borne in on me. Of course I had no thoughts of taking any such foolish step. But just suppose I should think of it, how should I care for a wife? I simply said I needed more money and he increased my stipend in a noteworthy manner.

On the Friday following the receipt of Herron's letter, I went to carry the news to Miss Oswald. She received me with the same kindly courtesy. I passed on to her the message: she was sorry that he had not given a full and complete acceptance. Perhaps, she said, when he did come he could be persuaded. But if not, then she was quite content to leave the case in my hands. If it were solvable, she was certain that I would solve it. I know that I blushed like a school-boy. But who would not at such praise from such a source?

We talked long and quietly, thinking and planning together. Never had she seemed more sympathetic, or closer to me. Poor girl; she looked tired and worn. The holidays had indeed been a strain upon her.

As we stood talking while I was making my adieu, I went mad with longing and heart hunger; the nearness of her, the sweetness of her presence, the glory of her smile, drove deep to my heart. Oh, that hungry longing of more than thirty bitter, lonesome years. She was my first love. The pent-up flood of passion swept away all bounds and I gathered her into my arms and found her lips.

God of gods, she did not draw back! She was not angry!

"Darling, dearest!" The flood of my speech broke

and flowed about her in waves of burning, endearing names. That long first kiss, and her arm crept round my neck. She loved me! Oh, only a little! But—she loved me!

CHAPTER X.

DETECTIVE SULLIVAN FINDS THE MURDERER.

THERE was this one time in my life—and it may come to all men; I know not—when I felt the moving desire for prayer. When I left Isobel that night, I carried with me the knowledge that the dear girl cared; and the wild swirl of my love for her was bearing me out into unknown seas. That the call of my being should be answered in her heart, made me raise a reverent heart to my Maker and give thanks, thanks, the sincere outburst of a heart overflowing.

I wonder, had I been led through the ordinary paths of boys, with their childish affections, up through the affairs of a young man, would I have felt the swell of tenderness, the desire for a love returned, the anxiety to enfold in protecting care the one love of my life? What a starving, heart-hungry life I had led!

Stitmore Tithes? I entirely forgot him. I neither knew nor cared whether he was engaged to Isobel. We loved; with that knowledge I would fight, kill, yes, torture, rather than have her love escape me. Even if she was promised to Tithes, I knew that she did not love him. 'Twas me she loved. With her good-night kiss upon my lips, it was a new Larry Bowen that walked forth into the night.

I was of little use on the problem of Mr. Oswald's death, the next day. I suppose a man ought to be par-

doned some slight mental aberration when he has just won the loveliest maiden in the world; and for the next week my head was in the air. At every opportunity I called on Isobel. Not that I found many nights on which she was free. But we talked over the telephone every day, and if she was to be at home that evening, without visitors, Larry Bowen was there. Those evenings with her were my Heaven.

The search for the murderer of J. Marion Oswald was continuing its journey at its accustomed gait,—slowly. The many happenings that contributed toward our puzzlement were dormant. Yet when they did break, they caught us unawares.

Isobel and I had talked of our future one evening, until we reached one subject upon which we did not agree. She was engaged to Stitmore Tithes, and it was my thought and desire that she should break with him at once. But Isobel would not. She knew Tithes, she said, as a violent, revengeful type of man when crossed. Though she professed to believe that he would never have considered her had she not been her father's daughter, still, his desire for wealth, his scheming after power, led her to dread throwing an obstruction across the path he was following; and to him, her asking to be released from the engagement would be such an obstruction.

The loss of her father still weighed heavily upon her. Now she seemed to feel that if she broke with Tithes, I should be in danger. That was a very foolish fear, but to me a very dear one; just to have some one care whether I came or went, to be solicitous for my safety was a new bliss.

"Of course Tithes knows nothing about your father's

death," I hazarded. If he were the man she painted him, then he became another kink in the problem; for he had the motives. J. Marion Oswald's death, and Tithes' marriage to Isobel, would at once put him into the class of America's biggest financial men.

"Of course he does not, any more than the rest of us," and Isobel moved away from me. "I know you do not like him, and I fear him, while I do respect him; but do not try to tangle him in any way with father's death. He had no reason for killing father. Why, you might just as well suspect Deborah!"

The comparison did not strike me as favorably as she intended it should. Perhaps, had I known a little more about Deborah, I might have known whether to suspect her or not. I knew that friend Abe would be most happy if he could have an interview with her. I mentioned nothing of my doubt but asked:

"Have you seen her since your father died? Has she materialized again?"

"Oh, no. Oh, Larry, I haven't had the heart to call her."

"I know, dearest," and there was an interval of silence filled as lovers know how to fill such periods. Then I suggested that perhaps Deborah was lonesome and wanted to be called. I made the suggestion in a joking manner but Isobel took it seriously.

"Come on, dear, let us go to father's study and try to bring her."

I was sure that it would result in nothing. I had a hazy idea, perhaps gathered subconsciously from Sullivan's skeptical comments, that J. Marion Oswald was not without guile, and that the medium was known to

him. But if my Isobel wanted to try, why, bless her dear heart, she should try.

The room was in very much the condition in which it had been left. It was cleaned and dusted every day, and was warm and cozy. I moved two chairs to places beside her father's table and put them where she indicated. The table was a large and heavy affair, and the chairs were cumbersome. With them arranged to her satisfaction, we sat down.

"Go ahead, darling, and rap," I told her.

"Oh, not yet. The light must be out."

Spirit calling is something that should appeal to all lovers. I made haste to the switch and after pressing the knob, groped my way back to her, aided by her softly calling to me. Then the chairs had to be rearranged somewhat to suit me. I wanted to make sure that no spirit could drag my Isobel from my side; and I did so by making it necessary that she first sever my arm, before she could secure my sweetheart. After a few necessary preliminaries, necessary from lover's standpoints, Isobel said that she would rap.

"Tap, tap, (pause) tp." Then "tap, tap, (pause) tp." Over and over she repeated these set calls, as she said her father was wont to use them. Other than this, we kept silent. I was willing to stay where we were and have her tap, tap, tap, all evening. Of course, now that her father was gone, we'd not—came to me a vision of a forest in autumn; the flaring reds, the gorgeous yellows, and the deep greens in the shaded portions, and over it all the scent of the woodland; gradually this odor was obtruding itself on my attention. But almost before I sensed it, from above our heads came five long, slow-measured, knocks. I was startled.

Instinctively, I drew Isobel closer; the knocks continued. Now they were loud, now so faint that I almost doubted I heard them. Once it seemed as though some one walked across the floor above us with a steady, slow, solemn step. But Isobel was not listening to these noises; she had turned and was watching the wall where Deborah always appeared. As I felt her turn from me, I too turned.

I had no time to think. I was too busy observing, watching; something was going on, something which I did not understand. My ears were strained to catch the slightest movement on any side of us. There was no knowing what might be planning against us there in the dark. I would have given a good deal to have had the light switch under my hand.

My nerves were keyed to a pitch of tenseness. I expected anything; I feared everything. What could —A small patch of luminous matter appeared rather high up the wall on the side of the room in which was the door to Mr. Oswald's bedroom.

At first it seemed about a foot across, very faint and hazy, and moving very rapidly. It grew larger by degrees and gradually sank to about a foot above the floor, where it became a swirling mass of a bulk equal to that of a huge man, but top-shaped in form. Out of this swirl, in a sudden burst, appeared a woman in white filmy robes. A woman? Perhaps not. Rather a wraith in a woman's shape.

I am not given to impressionism. I always pride myself on my hardheaded reasoning; but there was something odd, not understandable, about that specter. The face was that of a woman anywhere from twenty to forty; sometimes she appeared young, and at the

next glance she had aged greatly. And—the weird part of it was that I could see the wall behind her through her form.

A ghostly figure—yes, yet every ounce of reason I possessed, cried out against it with the shout “fraud.” Oh, for a chance at that light switch. Yes, and if I had switched it on and found nothing?

I felt my flesh shrinking at the thought. A creepy sensation moved along my spine and toward my hair. Why?—Why?—I have attended many a professional séance, some where I was convinced that the medium was crooked, yet, every time when the figure appears, I experience these same sensations. My sensations could not be a criterion as to its genuineness. This one I could see through, though. It bore a stamp of truthfulness I never had encountered before. In Isobel I felt no shrinking; her breath came as quietly and as evenly as before.

All these thoughts passed through my mind in a flash, almost. For, as the figure appeared, Isobel addressed it.

“Deborah, have you waited for my call?”

The white face and the tenuous form remained immobile. The eyes, deep set and far away, seemed to bore into us with an intense look. They commanded my attention, for I had the sensation of having seen them before. Whose they were, where I had seen them, I could not have stated; but the odd impression that I had gazed upon them previously, and not long ago, either, persisted. Yet how could I have known the woman who had been Deborah? She probably had been dead some years, perhaps many years, and where would I have run across her? Doubtless the thought

that I knew the eyes was illusive; calm reason said no, I had never seen them; but—had I?

Isobel tried the wraith with several other questions, yet received no answer. Was it that her father alone had the key? She tried her again and again, yet it was only at the eighth query that words first came from the figure, and these had no relation to the question asked.

“Consider thy father,” fell slowly on our ears; the words seem to come from far, far off; in the distance beyond great hills, across wide valleys, onward it flows with the steady music of a stream, faintly whispering. “Consider thy father; as he is now, so shall you be; consider, repent.”

As the final words began to roll forth in the distance, I drew my feet toward me, slowly, quietly; unloosed my arm from Isobel and with a kick at the chair in which I was sitting that dashed it backward, hurled myself at the figure. I grasped—nothing; instead I banged into the door between the two rooms with a thud that nearly deprived me of my senses.

I had been in no position to make a quick move; my feet were beneath the table, my chair close to Isobel's, and she sat between me and the apparition; so that the move I made, while I tried to make it quickly, had consumed much time. As I made the noise kicking over the chair, the figure had vanished like a flash. There was no fading out.

The butler's story of the figure floating across the room was in my mind. As I struck the door and found no spirit, it recurred to me with redoubled force. What held the bedroom beyond; what unknown there

lay in wait for me? With curari? Or what fled at my approach?

I surely disliked to open that door. The instincts of a long line of forebears with banshees roosting on their rooftrees and pixies working about their places o' nights, cried "Forbear." It was because I really was such a coward that I forced myself to find the knob and open the door. This, too, took time; I couldn't see and, not being able to recall which side of the door held the knob, I had to grope about until I found it. As I pulled open the door and rushed through, there was nothing to be seen, save a luminous patch of mist or vapor, that drifted away between the two windows. Even as I watched it, it disappeared. I called to Isobel to turn on the lights. I was not acquainted with the location of the switch in her father's room, but when she lighted up the study, enough illumination filtered in so that I at once spied it at the right-hand side of the doorway. As I flooded the room with light, I looked about in hopes of seeing something that was out of place, or something upset. Everything was spick and span. The rooms were dusted and cleaned every day, that was self-evident.

Now I had to make explanation to Isobel.

"Oh, Larry, how could you? Just when she was getting ready to talk," and the dear girl showed keen distress. I tried to take her in my arms, but she eluded me.

"Darling," and I gave over the attempt and stood in the doorway between the two rooms. Under the stress of emotion, I fear my voice trembled. "Whenever I hear any one threaten your dear self, may I rot

in the lowest pits of hell, if I don't dash to throttle the life out of them, even as I did tonight."

"Threat? Larry, how can you," and Isobel eyed me in amaze. "Deborah would not. She loves me."

"Her words have a peculiar manner of showing it, then."

"But, Larry, what she said was right and true. All she said was—now let me think—yes, what she said was, 'Consider your father; as he is, so shall you be; repent.'"

"No threat," I argued. "Isn't 'As he is now, so shall you be,' about as strong a one as she can make?"

"Oh, you dear old boy," and she came close, reaching up to grasp the lapels of my coat. "Thinking of protecting me; yes, though it was from what was never intended. Why, all she meant was that all flesh is mortal and that some day I, too, shall be as father."

"And heaven grant that day is years and years in the future. But what about the 'consider, repent,' " and my arms held her close. "Why the necessity of adding them?"

"Just to show you, you fond old silly, that I am a wicked creature and have many sins of which I must needs repent. Now, do not dispute me; I say they are many and I know."

That ended it for that evennig. Who was I to disturb her faith in her father? If I voiced all the suspicions I had of Deborah, poor Isobel, if she came to share them, would certainly lose some of the implicit trust she had in her father. Yet it seemed to me, as I thought over the situation, that if Abe and I were right, she would have to learn a lot of unpleasant things about Mr. Oswald.

Yet, there was the ever present consideration, Wasn't she the one that was in the right? Was not this a genuine materialization? I have been through psychic experiences that left me in no condition to doubt. In this case there was as much reason why I should credit Deborah's apparition, as there was that I accept the others. To me, the one suspicious thing was the threat. But was it a threat? Was not the intuition of Isobel correct? Was it not more of a solemn warning?

The more I looked at the words Deborah had spoken, "Consider thy father; as he is now, so shall you be; consider, repent," the more certain I became that Isobel was right, though it looked and sounded as though some one had put together parts of three or four Biblical quotations. As I walked slowly down to the office, after rushing home and getting into my working suit, in the glamor of contentment and happiness Isobel threw about me, I admitted to myself that I was badly off the track. The spirit of Deborah had returned yet another time to cheer Isobel, whom she loved; bless the dear old soul for that, though of course she could not help the loving.

Every night now I made it a practice of running down to the office; there was nothing moving in the Oswald case and I was on hand if they should need me. But there was no call for this night and I went back to my room.

Next morning I stopped in to see Abe Sullivan; he was not at his office, and one of the force told me he had not been in for two days. I left word for him to come up and see me when he got back. Returning home, I wrote for a while, then lay down for a nap.

Abe came along at two o'clock and woke me up. He was full of news. I gave him my chair while I dropped back on the couch. For a moment he busied himself in lighting a lean brown cigar which he extracted carefully from an inside pocket. This drawing well, he cocked his legs up on my table and, leaning back, began.

"At last this list of 'M. E.'s' has turned out something worth while. I've worked along down through it, hunting up, visiting and talking with people. Lots of 'M. E.'s' have moved away and I can't trace them. Others are dead. Some of the rest were queer, but none of them appear to have had any particular dealings with old Oswald. Finally I ran across an old man, a former employee at the plants, who told me of a most unusual happening. It so happens that the man most concerned also is an 'M. E.', Matthias Erliesbein, to give it in full." Abe paused and I nodded. So far, so good.

"The thing happened away back in '79, when to belong to a labor union was to be an anarchist. At that time, some of the men in Oswald's southside plant got a union of some kind started. I suppose it was a weak, visionary sort of affair. Toss me the matches." In his eagerness to retail his information, he had forgotten to draw on his cigar.

So Abe's list didn't go back far enough after all, I thought, as he was working on his cigar. But never mind that; apparently he had found something. After he got the weed lighted and had taken two or three puffs, he resumed.

"Anyway, Erliesbein was on the committee sent to the old man, then not such a patriarch, with a long

list of demands. As we look at things nowadays, those were mighty conservative requests. They thought twelve hours a day too long and fifteen cents an hour too small. Then they wanted the dangerous machines protected, the union recognized, and a few little things like that. I'm giving it to you straight; one of the members of the union who gave me the story, had a copy of the old demands."

"I'll bet that J. Marion Oswald fired the whole committee," I stated; it was a safe guess from what I knew of Mr. Oswald's early career.

"You win. He did. He not only fired them but he blacklisted them; and his remarks, as he tied the can to them, must have been far from elevating. Of course the union didn't strike. Those early labor organizations were bluffs. They held a meeting that night after Erliesbein and the two others on the committee got thrown out. They were fireworks, all right; but it seems that Erliesbein got up before them and made some direct threats against J. Marion's life; swore he'd never be content, never rest a day, until he made the old boy sweat blood for his crime against humanity; and I guess there was a plenty in that 'crime against humanity' spiel. Oswald's workers used to die like flies from the T. B., and those that escaped it, drank themselves to death. It was all they had to look forward to, from what Oswald offered them. But to go on. When the old man had suffered enough, Erliesbein swore that he'd kill him. What do you think of it?"

I shook my head and laughed at him.

"Say, Abe, if that's all you've got, you'd better drop it. If every man that threatened J. Marion Oswald's life was behind the bars, we'd be building a lot of new

buildings down at Joliet. Erliesbein never made an attempt, did he?"

"Not that we can find out, but he talked enough. As he couldn't get a job, for the blacklist was perfectly legal in those days, he bought a corner saloon and helped to send his fellows out on the long trail. But he kept right on talking and threatening. Never a day went by that he didn't rehearse the iniquities of Oswald and tell what he'd do to him some day. His place became a hangout for a really radical bunch, and Erliesbein was right in with them."

"But consider, man," I argued. "That happened over forty years ago. Your man must be an old fellow. He'd never have been able to carry out such a murder as this one. Have you been able to trace the curari to him?"

"No, and I don't expect to. If he was cute enough to turn this trick, we aren't going to stumble on any sale of poison recorded to him. But never mind that; consider these facts. First, he had a strong motive; second, there are his constant threats; and last, when he heard that J. Marion had died, he nodded his head and chortled, 'Good; at last some one is getting back at the old devil for his cussed meanness.' And mind you, this was before we had more than a suspicion that it was murder that he was proclaiming it. His further remarks showed that he'd have liked to add, 'If I would, I could tell something.' That you may know how he felt, all I got to say is that he kept open house all the day he heard of J. Marion's death. Pretty fair, eh? We've got just about enough to make him talk."

"Abe," I chuckled, as he finished, "are you open to a little bet on the side? If you are, I'll lay you five to

one that this man Erliesbein was not the murderer of Mr. Oswald. And I'll lay you two to one that he was not even indirectly concerned and that he knows nothing about it. What do you say? Willing to take the short end of these bets?"

Abe wasn't. I do not think that there is a drop of Scotch blood in his veins, but he has all their cautious and canny ways. He wagered only on absolute certainties. As I thought, Abe wasn't as sure as he was trying to make out.

On the face of it, Erliesbein could not be the man. Whoever it was that had reached the fourth floor of that house filled with servants, killed the master and descended without being seen, was some one with a brain that had few equals upon earth. To think out such a plan, and to put it into execution, required executive ability of a high order.

Do men of that calibre go into the business of running a corner saloon? Hardly. Nor are they of the class that take all the world into their confidence concerning their wrongs. These are nursed in secret; in secret they plan their revenge and for it bide their time. If the murderer of J. Marion Oswald was ever found, I felt that he would fill some such requirements as these.

He would be a well-educated man, not only in bookish lines, but also in the broader fields of travel and of practical matters.

He would be wealthy; not, perhaps, with even a moderate sized fortune, but at least comfortably well off.

He would not be a very young man, nor yet an old man. For his act showed not only vigor and quickness

such as go with youth, but also the calmness and self-possession of maturer years; without both of these he could not have succeeded.

It would probably be found that he had waited long years for his revenge; indeed, it might well be that it was not a wrong to himself that he punished.

Was Erliesbein such a man? I very much doubted it, though I did not know him. Nor did Sullivan, yet, I was sure. Abe's description was a composite portrait made up from the words of many others.

I decided that for the present there was no great necessity to inform Abe of my attempt to strangle a ghost. He had enough to work on, with his present theory. I'd keep the happening to myself and do a little investigating on the quiet.

Just then there came a loud bang on my door that brought me to my feet with a jump; it sounded as though some one had brought a battering-ram, and was attempting to force an entrance. But in a second, it was followed by a faint, weak tapping. "Come in," I shouted, as I started for the door.

Slowly it opened.

CHAPTER XI.

“DO YOU WANT TO DIE?”

IN response to my invitation the door swung slowly on its hinges; well toward the top of the gap appeared a round fur cap and immediately beneath it a high forehead; each part entered deliberately in almost as stately a manner as a great ship glides into its slip. Below the forehead emerged two deep-set eyes with a narrow, thin beak standing between; a firm, thin-lipped mouth and a square chin followed as deliberately as before by a long neck swathed in a white muffler, narrow shoulders, a long waist and arms; and long thin legs with gaiters and rubbers.

Abe sat and stared as this apparition oozed into the room; but I had no sooner seen the eyes than I bounded forward with both hands extended.

“How are you, Dr. Herron?” I cried gleefully, as I grasped his one free hand and wrung it heartily. His other was carrying his traveling bag which he carefully and methodically deposited before replying.

“Quite well, thank you.” His quiet tones flowed as steadily as he had moved. “I am sorry that I made such a commotion at your door. The carpet at the head of the stairway was not securely fastened. My foot became entangled and I was precipitated at your entrance with the result that one end of my bag came in violent contact with a panel. I trust that no dam-

age was done. How are you finding yourself and how are matters progressing?”

Abe was watching the newcomer with a covert smile on his lips. Dr. Herron was wont to be accepted for something he was not by those who met him for the first time.

“All fine, Doctor, all fine. Had anything to eat yet? And—oh, yes, this is my friend, Mr. Abe Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan, Dr. Herron.”

The two men acknowledged the introduction and shook hands. Yes, he had already had lunch, Dr. Herron remarked, as I helped him off with his coat, took his bag and cap, with the coat, into my bedroom. When I returned, he and Sullivan were chatting. As the doctor was seated comfortably, I went back to the couch.

Herron was explaining his trip. He had been held up for a day somewhere in Kentucky, the heavy snows wrecking a freight running before the train on which he was. He had reached Chicago about the middle of the afternoon, having had dinner on the diner. He had taxied directly from the station to my rooms. We talked along, exchanging news, and drifted from this into reminiscences. Dr. Herron described some of the cases he had been called into during the past few months. Only he did not call them “cases.” To him they were “psychic manifestations.” Abe Sullivan was an interested listener; he didn’t care much for those investigated that had proved to have a strong psychic basis; but when Cyrus Herron described those in which he had detected fraud or trickery, Abe was all ears. He was particularly interested in the episode of the man who heard spirit singers. Abe insisted that in

some ways it paralleled our mystery of the death of Mr. Oswald.

"Here we have a murder, or a suicide, to unravel, and we find that in this case, too, the spirits were mighty interested in conveying a warning," he explained. "Nearly like the poor devil you were telling about," and he nodded at Dr. Herron.

"Of course I am in no position to judge of the similarity or dissimilarity, as I know nothing of the death of which you speak. But I am led to infer from your remarks that there were psychic manifestations directly concerned in the taking off of this Mr. Oswald. If such is the case, it would greatly interest me and I should like to go into the matter when I can find the time. Just at present I am en route to St. Paul. I only stopped off here because my friend Larry asked for my advice in a matter which puzzled him. I can give him but a few hours, but perhaps can assist somewhat."

"Why, Doctor," I remarked in amazement. I knew he was forgetful, but I did think he would remember the details of as big a case as this we were on, and at least the name of Oswald, one of America's greatest. "The case Mr. Sullivan mentioned is the very one I wrote you about."

"So you did," he replied, entirely without embarrassment. "The details had escaped me. I do not load my mind with mental notes for which I have no immediate use." He turned to me and with a leisurely gesture toward Abe, went on: "I take it that this gentleman is connected with the matter."

"Oh, yes; connected with the case and with the police," I informed him.

“Then I judge that the matter is one in which evidence of fraudulent practices are plainly manifested. In that case, there is no prospect of my advice or assistance being needed or desired.”

“Hold on, Doc,” I protested. “You are getting ahead of this game. Why, there were all kinds of spirit manifestations and they look like the real thing.” In my haste I stretched the truth somewhat. “J. Marion Oswald was himself a student of the supernatural.”

Here in my hurry I again crossed a crochets of the Doctor. He looked at me in a reproachful manner.

“Excuse me, Larry; there is no supernatural. Surely you recall my strictures on the use of that word, the summer you and I were lucky enough to stumble upon the correct solution of the episodes of the supernormal.”

Yes; well I knew, but in the haste of speaking it had slipped my mind. Two things there were about which Cyrus Herron was very particular. One was that he achieved his successes in his work by pure luck—and to hear him tell of them, it did look as though luck was the predominating feature. The other concerned the supernatural. Speaking partly for the benefit of Abe Sullivan, he added: “The word commonly used by those who desire accuracy is ‘supernormal.’”

I straightened out my remarks and let it go at that.

“Just how does the supernormal enter into the death of Mr. Oswald?” he then wanted to know. Between Abe and me, he received a history of the case as far as it had developed. I began.

“J. Marion Oswald, one of this city’s wealthiest men, and a power in the world of finance, a man well on in the seventies, is found dead, or at least in a dying con-

dition, on the fourth floor of his home; his only daughter discovered him."

Abe put in, as I stopped for a moment:

"Only one exit, door to stairs, through main part of house. Windows all locked. But—he died of poison—curari."

"Ah," said Cyrus Herron with little interest.

"Two holes inside left wrist; holes inch and a half apart. No weapon found near him, or on that floor or in the house. Daughter, first to find him, calls maid; they straighten him out and send for aid. When body is lifted, torn corner of paper with letters 'p-e-n-t' is picked up. Paper cheap ordinary kind—letters typed by Densmore machine. Nobody knows anything about it." Abe stopped; these were the facts he considered of greatest moment, for the spirit of Deborah as yet could not be labeled and tagged.

Sullivan pulled out his cigar case, and passed it to Cyrus Herron. The Doctor did not smoke. Abe selected one himself and lit up while I took up the tale. I felt that nothing yet said had more than a passing interest for the psychic investigator.

"Mr. Oswald and his daughter had been experimenting for some time in the psychic field and had developed mediumistic powers."

"At least the old man had, according to the girl," Abe interrupted.

"Hold on, Abe," I came back at him. "I'm not so sure but what Miss Oswald has the power, too. But to continue what I started to say. Mr. Oswald, of late months, had been having séances with a spirit called Deborah. His method of summoning her was by taps which his daughter remembered well enough

to reproduce for us. Abe recognized these as the Morse code for the letters ‘M’ and ‘E.’ He thinks that it was used as a signal call, knowingly on the part of Mr. Oswald, but Miss Oswald affirms that it was not; that the raps were used by mere chance; that she was the one who devised them.”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Sullivan’s voice had a curious undertone that I resented. But I heeded it not. I went on.

“This spirit answered questions both as to the past and the future with surprising accuracy, as we have the account from Miss Oswald’s lips. The wraith was accustomed to opening each evening’s session with the words, ‘Do not forget, Marion; before it is too late, repent.’ The last words she uttered were sometimes this same formula.”

Materializations were common occurrences with Dr. Herron. Still, I could see that he was somewhat interested. He now asked a question.

“Where did this Deborah appear?”

“In the Oswald home, in Mr. Oswald’s study,” I answered. “The butler also claims to have seen the spirit very late one night when neither Mr. Oswald nor his daughter were at home. It appeared in his master’s bedroom which adjoined the study. Since Mr. Oswald’s death, I had not supposed that the spirit of Deborah would again appear. But she has; I have seen her.”

Abe sat up with a jerk and eyed me with reproach. I had not yet told him of my experience.

“You’ve seen her,” he cried. “When and where? Why didn’t you let me in on it?”

I explained that I had not yet had an opportunity;

that he had been telling me of his finding a suspect through the initials "M. E." he was tracing, and that just then Herron had come in. So now I related just what had occurred. I detailed how Isobel had called for some time without result; then how the answering knocks came.

After a few moments of these, she appeared. I should say that she was a woman of about medium height, rather slender, if the moving draperies didn't belie my judgment. I cannot tell how old she was," and gave the reasons.

"There was one thing I may mention," I added, as we sat in silence for a few seconds. "It may be just a phantasy of mine, but at the time I was strongly impressed with the belief that I had seen her face somewhere before, or at least the eyes; when I heard her voice, if it really was a voice, it struck me that, in a vague way, it was familiar."

"I wish I'd been there." Abe chewed savagely at the butt of his cigar. "We'd have gone to the bottom of this mystery in a hurry. Let me get my hands on that Deborah and we'll find out who helped J. Marion Oswald out of the world."

"You will?" I smiled. "How about my luck? I made a dash at her and she flashed out and left me to run bang up against the door. As if that wasn't enough, I saw the spirit fading away in the air of the bedroom."

"There was no light in either room, I take it," Cyrus Herron asked.

"No. It was not wholly dark in the bedroom, though, for while the shades were down at the window facing

east, they had not been lowered over the two to the south."

Dr. Herron asked many questions about the arrangements of the room. We made it clear to him. After he got the locations of the doors, windows and other articles placed mentally in relation to each other, he asked.

"Was there a light outside the house?"

"None near it; there are two street lights at its front, neither directly in front," I replied, but I wanted to tell the rest of my story. "Let me get along to the last message," I added.

"Last message," echoed Abe. "Another one."

"Sure there is." I hastened on. "Deborah was not very communicative this time. All she said before she dematerialized were a few words. But they were a plenty. There can be no doubt that just as the others were intended for her father, these were meant for Isobel."

"Isobel, eh?" Abe grinned. Dr. Herron turned and eyed me. I hurried on with the narrative.

"'Consider thy father; as he is now, so shall you be; consider, repent.' How is that for a neat little threat? Miss Oswald differs greatly with me as to what it means. She says it is but a warning of the temporal value of life; that some day she must follow her father. I do not think it was so intended. I believe that the message conceals a good, broad admonition to do something Deborah wanted done, or take the consequences. But Miss Oswald almost convinced me that she was right. What do you think?" I looked from one to the other as I spoke the question. Abe was ready with his opinion.

"Threat? Sure it's a threat. All we got to do now is to find this Deborah and a little third degree work and we'll know all about how this curari got into J. Marion Oswald. I told you before that if we could get hold of this spirit, we'd be all to the good." He nodded sagely as he blew a great cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

I wanted to come back with, "Yes, and not long ago you were swearing that Mr. Oswald was a suicide. And even today you had found someone you thought could give you information, if he were not the guilty person." But I did not. Let Sullivan hop from theory to theory; what was that to me? He and I had helped each other on many an occasion, and I was not anxious to get him down on me by any uncalled for pleasantry concerning his short memory. Dr. Herron was not so sure that it was a threat.

"I am always willing to give full credit in latitude to any statement," he commented. "I cannot see why I should assume that everything another speaks is meant to be understood in the light of the worst possible construction that can be put upon it. Why not take the best? Personally, I do not see why Miss Oswald's interpretation should not be the correct one." He looked at Abe; Abe said nothing; Doctor Herron went on.

"In either event, that the apparition is produced by fraud, or if it be genuine, I assume that there is no connection between Miss Oswald and the spirit, or you would have mentioned it. Therefore, if it be genuine, the greater number of reasons favor its being a conventional warning. There would be no good reason for a messenger from the other world to make threats.

Should the manifestation be fraudulent, there are fully as many arguments for the milder interpretation as there are for the stronger. No, on the logic of probabilities, Miss Oswald's faith would be justified."

"Then why introduce the 'Consider thy father'? If it was a gentle hint to prepare for the life eternal, why not give it direct?" I felt all the old doubts surging back, just as they had risen that evening. I was anxious to know how Herron would answer this question.

"From what you say, I think that you may be charged with breaking up the séance. If so, no one knows what further messages along this line you interrupted. Suppose that Mr. Oswald, but lately arrived on the other plane, is trying to get word back to his daughter and the message became mixed with another one. This is not the first I have known of a peculiar mixing of ideas to develop in a medium's messages." Cyrus Herron was no longer slowly methodical. He was aroused and I noticed that when he is, every sense he possesses is keenly alert; then his slow steady movements of speech and action become abrupt and sharp.

Of course Abe maintained his views and the two argued back and forth at some length. Sullivan had the last word with an unanswerable argument, the "we'll show you."

"When we get Deborah," he insisted, "we'll find that she was connected with Matthias Erlesbein. Her coming at the call of 'M. E.,' those being his initials, together with the hatred he bore J. Marion, is going to get him in bad still further."

Dr. Herron now turned to this new subject, of which

he had not heard. He looked toward me as he spoke.

"You mentioned the letters 'M' and 'E' as being those with which the spirit was summoned. What has this Matthias Erliesbein to do with those?"

I explained how we thought that "M. E." might be the initials of someone well known to Mr. Oswald, someone of whom he might have thought a great deal, and that if we could find that person, it would go far toward solving the problem of Mr. Oswald's death.

I told him how my efforts to find such a person were without result, although Miss Oswald had named over as many of her father's old business associates and friends as she could recall; how Sullivan had gone to the offices and plants of the Oswald companies and what excellent success he had had. Abe grunted when I said "excellent success."

Going on, I described the detective's painstaking method of investigation, and how at last he was sure it had borne fruit. I gave the details, with Abe's assistance, just as he had narrated them to me.

"Did you discover if there had ever been another encounter between the two?" Dr. Herron asked Sullivan.

Abe was sure that there had been only the one. Erliesbein had so fallen into the habit of telling his great grievance and his vow for revenge, that Abe was positive that if the two had met again, what with the violent tongue-lashing Erliesbein would have been prompted to administer, and the equally violent reply he would have received, for Oswald was a man with a competent command of invective, there would have been more for the old seeker after revenge to cherish.

"That leaves your position in connecting him with

the death in rather a precarious position," Dr. Herron commented when Abe had finished. This drew the detective forward to the edge of his chair where he poised as though to spring at my friend.

"It does?" truculently. "How's that?"

Dr. Herron hastened to attempt an apology that was unneeded.

"Mr. Sullivan, I have no desire nor intention of intruding on your field of endeavor. My work simply is that of an investigator of psychic phenomena. I am not concerned with the legal or other sides of these demonstrations. I am not at all concerned with solving the problem of Mr. Oswald's death, except incidentally. I retract what I just said; if it gives you offense, consider the words as never uttered."

But Abe was not a bumptious, opinionated individual. He wanted to know, and know why, so requested the Doctor to give all his reasons.

"Not a bit of it, Dr. Herron," his voice was cordial. "I don't want you to take it back. I'm not one of those fellows that thinks that everyone coming into a case is going to take all the glory for himself. Furthermore, I don't care if he does get it. He's welcome, for all of me. What I want to know is how the murder was done so we can catch the murderer. I've got enough of a reputation not to have to worry over a failure or two. And I'm big enough to want to hear where my theories fall down, even before I take them out and try and put them into action. Let's hear the big objection."

Sullivan's voice was so hearty and his manner so convincing, that the Doctor complied.

"If you are correct in assuming that Mr. Oswald

was aware of the meaning in code of the raps he used—and this seems probable—then the letters stood for one very near and dear to him. In which event, why should he be calling with the initials of a man such as Matthias Erliesbein, whom he had seen but once? Did Erliesbein make such an impression that Mr. Oswald would call him through a medium? And if Erliesbein is still living, why call him anyway? He certainly could not send his spirit from the other land, when it was still on earth. Once again; does it seem probable that Mr. Oswald would become so attached to a man that he would use the psychic route to communicate with him? If there was an M. E., isn't it almost certain that the one he was seeking to reach was a woman?"

I do not know what Abe thought but I had to admit that the logic was certainly that way. It explained a lot of things. A man like J. Marion Oswald, living a purely self-dominated life, a life centering always on self, does not drop his life's training in habit and thought when the end of life draws near. It wasn't the desire scientifically to investigate supernormal realms that led to his taking it up. It was either to convince himself that J. Marion Oswald would not end when he lost the earthly garb, but would continue to exist after what we call death; or it was a want, a need on his part for someone lost to him. All through his life he had found that nothing of earth was denied him. Was he going to stand idly by and go without the thing or things he wanted, simply because another world was supposed to intervene? Not he. Others had begun to effect a connection between the two worlds; so would he. He had done it; to his daughter's

satisfaction, at least. And in her judgment, to his own.

He had been a sly old campaigner all his life. He was trained to work in the dark; the dark was protection; to use the open meant loss of money. This habit, too, had gone with him into his search for his desire. Here his trail had been carefully covered, so that his daughter, with him night after night at the séances, never suspected that he used M. E. knowingly, or that he was trying to reach a particular spirit.

If we could get at the truth of the matter, I suspect that Mr. Oswald suggested to Isobel that she had devised the series of raps. But, after all, that didn't matter. The affairs he had so carefully concealed were being slowly revealed. I took new hope; eventually we would find out who injected the curari into the veins of the multimillionaire and escaped without leaving a trace.

Abe took us out to supper, then left us and we came back to my rooms afterward. I telephoned down to the office, and as there was no press of work, decided to stay with the doctor that evening. He had but a few hours he could spare and I planned to take him to the Oswald home early next day and let him look over the scene of Deborah's materializations. Abe wouldn't be with us. He had started the wheels turning and expected that in their revolutions Matthias Erliesbein, under the pressure of their relentless grip, would let drop a few facts. The hater of J. Marion Oswald would have the chance to make good his boast, if it were a boast, that "he could tell something if he would."

Next morning we started as early as possible for the Oswald home. Tasker admitted us and Isobel received

us with a smile that set my heart to jumping. She took us into the reception room and I explained how Dr. Herron was so tied up with engagements that he could give us little time.

She was disappointed but not disheartened. Her first thought was to find the party guilty of her father's death; and she realized that Herron's interest in the case was from the supernormal side, that he was more interested in solving the status of Deborah, than in who drove the poisoned tipped weapon into her father's arm. In regard to Deborah, Isobel was convinced that there was nothing to be discovered.

"I had so hoped that you would consent to investigate the whole problem," she told him. "I have heard so much of what you have accomplished on other mysteries."

"Miss Oswald," and Dr. Herron bowed as he insisted, "everything I have achieved, outside of purely psychic matters, has been the result of sheer luck. I simply stumble upon some fact that the least trained intellect could not fail to see pointed to a certain conclusion. This luck cannot cling to me forever. I would not know what to do to set about discovering who killed your father. I couldn't follow a clue, as I believe they are called, a hundred yards without losing it."

Isobel looked at me, slightly puzzled. I smiled back, meaningly, and she understood.

"You are doing yourself an injustice, I am sure," she said. "In these days of blatant self-advertisement, your modesty does you credit. But with Mr. Bowen at work on the problem, your advice, I am sure, will

contribute greatly toward discovering who killed father. Oh, I must find out, I must find out.”

The anguish in her voice cut me deeply. Poor girl! I wished that Dr. Herron were miles away, that I might comfort her. From her tone one might have inferred that she suspected someone, and had fears that what she thought might be true; but I knew that she was worrying for fear we should not find the murderer and that her father would forever be branded in the minds of all with the stigma of “suicide.”

She took us to her father’s study, which Dr. Herron most wished to see. He examined the room closely, and performed a like service in Mr. Oswald’s bedroom. I showed him where the misty remnant of Deborah had dissolved.

“Rather odd that the spirit had to come into this room fully to dematerialize. It appears that it could be accomplished in the study; you bear witness to that. But, if so, why continue it in this room?” I could not solve the problem he propounded. Or was he giving me a hint?

He walked about the room gauging the point where I last saw the wraith, and finally looked out of the windows toward the street. The easternmost window in the south wall seemed to meet some requirement he had postulated. He called me over to a position he had taken between the two openings, and directed my attention to the street lamp.

“Notice that it is placed at such an angle with this wall of the house that you can get a bit of a glimpse of it by looking through this opening diagonally. Some rays of light must enter along the same angle.”

I grasped his meaning. The spirit as I had seen

it must have been illuminated, at least in transverse section, by the beam of light. And only that upon which had fallen the light rays, had been visible. No matter how self-illuminated Deborah had been in the study, in Mr. Oswald's chamber she lost it.

We returned to the study and both Isobel and I showed just where the spirit had materialized. I must have lost myself badly in my dash to capture her, for I had run into the door, while the place occupied by Deborah had been three feet to the right of the doorway.

Dr. Herron asked if we had noticed any noises. We testified to the knocking, to an apparent trampling in the room overhead before the appearance of Deborah, and to the spirit's voice speaking the warning. But we both affirmed that we heard not another sound.

"No door opening or closing, no footsteps?"

"No; I am sure there were none," I answered.

"Spirits do not have to open doors or to walk about," Isobel added. Her faith in Deborah was untouched.

Dr. Herron intimated that he had seen as much as he desired and was now ready to leave these rooms. I then asked him to come up to the museum. I wanted him to see where the body of Mr. Oswald had been found. Isobel, too, was anxious he should visit the fourth floor, but she could not accompany us.

"You'll be careful, will you not, Larry dear? There are so many dangerous things up there," she said in a low tone as we left the room, Dr. Herron preceding us at some distance under the charge of Tasker. "Father always warned me never to touch spears or arrows; so many are poisoned. And he told me to keep away from the rattlesnakes in the snake dance group. The

last warning he gave was concerning that old chest from Peru. He said that there was something peculiar about it. That no one understood just what it was, and for me not to go near it. You will not get into any danger, will you, dear?” she asked.

Of course I promised. Who wouldn't; no, I'd take the utmost care, for her sake, not to get cut on spears or other weapons.

The butler took us up. The room was no longer locked and barred. After the search Abe and I had made, the police had unsealed the collections. We entered; Tasker returned to the first floor.

I hastened to show him where the body lay when first I saw it; where I found the scrap of paper and then pointed out the spot beneath the tapestry and at the end of the chest, where Mr. Oswald was first discovered.

Dr. Herron looked at the tapestry, stood before the place where the millionaire had fallen, but spoke no word. After some moments I walked around in front of the chest. I decided to show him the interior of the box and kneeled down to open it, remarking as I did so,

“If this old relic could speak out, it would tell us what we want to know.”

Experience had shown that it was opened with difficulty, but I knew the best method. I seized the upper hasp with one hand, while with the other I pressed down strongly with the other against the lower portion of the lock. I was straining strenuously when, in a breath, I was seized and hurled violently backward.

“Do you want to die?” cried a voice in my ear.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MISSIVE WITH A CORNER GONE.

MY heart beat faster and I almost stopped breathing from the shock of fear; but this only lasted a few seconds. One moment I had been kneeling in front of the chest, conversing with Cyrus Herron; the next instant I was lying on my back, feet in air, some distance away; and in my ears were ringing the words, "Do you want to die?"

No, I did not desire to have my existence terminated, especially not at this time when I had everything to live for. Nor could I conceive of any good reason why Cyrus Herron should offer me this sudden choice; unless he had but just taken leave of his senses.

Yet it could not be that for, as I sat up, he was calmly standing before the box in intent deliberation. He was not even giving me the slightest consideration after having so rudely hurled me to one side. Apparently he had forgotten that I existed.

"Say, Doc, do you always serve your friends like that?" I inquired as I climbed to my feet. "Or is it just a playful little way of yours?"

He gave no heed to my question. With brows wrinkled in thought, he still gazed at the old chest from South America. My feelings, as well as my clothes, were a little ruffled and I tried him with another question.

"What do you mean by, 'Do I want to die?' Why did you jerk me back?"

Slowly he turned and looked me in the eyes; there was no humor in his; his face was set with a serious expression. In a methodical manner he looked from me to the chest, studied it round and about, and then back again to me.

"Larry, my boy," his firm, clear tones carried conviction, "I saved your life."

I was amazed; I could see no reason for such a statement; but his manner showed that he considered that he had spoken the truth. He had saved my life? I, too, looked closely at the chest and as I did so, Isobel's warning came back to me. Was it the chest? If so, what was there that he had observed which had escaped the microscopic examination of Abe Sullivan and myself? Had Dr. Herron, at a glance, noted the two sharp points that had delivered the death charge to Mr. Oswald?

"Yes, young man, had you opened that chest, I am sure that movement would have been your last."

I laughed.

"You are joking, Doctor. Why should the opening of the old box kill me?"

"Had you raised that lid, I am positive that at that very moment I would have seen you fall and die."

"But why? Why? Where are the points that would scratch me? Why, I've opened the chest three or four times and Sullivan has had it opened more times than that; neither of us was injured."

"You've had it open? Open, and were not injured? I do not understand." His expression showed his bewilderment. Gradually this expression faded and

his head dropped as he studied something unknown to me. Wrinkles crept up over his forehead and his eyes drifted into a far away look. For some moments, though his eyes roved about, he was lost to the things of this world. Remarks that I made fell on dull ears. Not that I hurled many at him. I knew his moods; in his own good time I would get the rights of it all.

"Larry," he asked, suddenly, "where did the chest come from?"

I gave him what information I had. I told how it was discovered in a cave in Peru, near Urabamba, by Jesus Quintanilla, an Indian, and that it was reported to have been associated with many bones. I said that it probably was the work of natives of the time of the Incas, and had doubtless been placed in the burial cave by its owner or maker.

"That chest made by an Indian? Nonsense," Herron scoffed. "Look at the regularity of the spacing of the bands;" and he pointed. "Notice the evenness in the designing, the balancing, the following of straight lines. Indian work lacks all that. In their productions is no balance of design such as is here plainly evident; nor such regularity of lines; no such truing them as to width. This chest has all the earmarks of a white man's work."

"What of that?" I wanted to know. "Couldn't some Indian have stolen it and hid it away in the cave; or have had his descendants bury it with him when he died?"

"But, Larry, this is a treasure chest."

"A treasure chest?" Figuratively my mouth opened. Actually, I but repeated, dazedly, "A treasure chest!" Then it came to me that it had been empty. I added,

"Well, it isn't any more. There was no treasure in it when we opened it. Someone beat us to it."

"You haven't grasped the point," and Dr. Herron, as calmly and simply as though addressing a child, went on to explain. "It is not the treasure that is first in my thoughts. I mentioned that the chest was probably made by a white man; and I now add that he was a Spaniard, for it is Spanish in design. Yet, to be truthful, I must also say that it is and it isn't. The general form is such that I declare it might have been made by an Iberian. But the workmanship; never have I observed such crude, rough craft as this chest shows. But to go on. Now attend carefully, for it is this that led me to think that I had saved your life." He leaned over and examined the lock a moment, some abrasion having caught his eye. Satisfied, he continued.

"In the early days of the conquest of Peru, when gold and silver, even precious stones, were to be had for the asking—at least for the taking—the Spanish conquerors became wealthy over night. They established a new line of nobility, with castles, retainers, and vast land holdings. Every such family, banks being unknown, possessed a treasure chest."

I nodded. Nothing startling in all this. The Doctor continued.

"These chests were heavy and strong, and remarkable ingenuity was displayed upon some of them. I have examined several in different museums. The point is that each treasure box was built in such a way that it was almost certain death for a thief to open them. I saw one in New York that shows the craft of the makers. The lid could be raised readily, and seemingly the treasure taken out with ease. But only ap-

parently. Lying on the top of the pile of coins, jewels, and gold plate, was a crucifix blazing with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, I know not what stones. Whoever attempted to take that object died. It was attached to a mechanism hid in the cover; as the cross was moved, a panel slid back in the inside of the lid, a concealed spring was released and a heavy steel club armed with long sharp teeth dashed downward upon the head of the unsuspecting thief. The blow was so delivered that it would hurl him back with a crushed skull. Then, deliberately, the mechanism would withdraw the weapon into its cavity, the panel close and the lid drop into place."

I whistled. Now I began to glimpse what Dr. Herron had meant when he told me he had saved my life. But he had still more to tell.

"That was one that I saw; it was somewhat more complicated than were the others. All the rest struck as the lid was raised, giving the blow every time, unless one knew how to shut off the mechanism. And this weapon was always in the lid which was very thick and heavy. The raising of it generated the power where-with the blow was delivered. Thus by his own effort did the thief store up enough energy to deprive himself, all unknowing, of life. The weapons were arranged on a plan whereby the strokes they delivered were sweeping ones; thus they covered a maximum of area with a minimum of reach; anyone within that sweep, as they must be to open the chest, would meet death, or be so severely injured, that they could not escape."

That completed his explanation. To say that I was interested, was putting it mildly. But the Doctor's description of a treasure chest, and of why he jerked

me back, did not account for Mr. Oswald's death. True, the chest was of odd make, and according to Dr. Herron, about the size and shape of a Spanish treasure-holding precursor of a modern bank. If it were such a man-slayer, how could it have reached out and smote J. Marion Oswald and then permitted the rest of us who raised the lid to go free? This looked too much like a reasoned discrimination to be considered for a moment.

"Sounds all right, Doctor, but I guess we can't apply it to this chest. You told me that treasure chests were heavy and made with thick walls?"

"Yes."

"Grab hold of one end of this." He did; we lifted it with little effort. "How's that for heft. Is it weighty enough for such a box?" He thought that it might be.

"Well then, look at this."

I stooped and with a sangfroid I did not feel, for his stories of the animate chests had upset me somewhat, worked the hasps and tore back the lid. The groaning and creaking reverberated through the museum hall. Nothing happened.

Dr. Herron had half inclined to halt my opening it; but, with an effort, he had drawn back his hand and merely stood on the alert to seize me at the slightest move on the part of the chest; but none came. Instead, the lid remained aloft, sustained by a copper brace which moved up one side as the cover rose, and held it open about four-fifths raised. If this were taken away, the lid would drop. But it was good and stout. Had the lid fallen, it would have done little damage; it was not heavy enough to injure anyone.

We pried up some of the copper bands and saw the wood beneath. There appeared to be two boards an inch thick, fastened together, the grain running in opposite directions, doubtless to give strength.

"See," I pointed out, "this chest hasn't sides thick enough to conceal a strong steel mechanism, such as you told about. It is only a trifle over two inches thick at any point."

He looked. It was as I said. Dr. Herron was not satisfied. He wanted the exact thickness. With three sticks and our handkerchiefs, we devised a crude caliper and discovered that within minute fractions, the thickness of top and bottom was the same and in no degree exceeded that of the sides.

"Yet I am not satisfied," and he shook his head. "You know that nowadays watches are made almost unbelievably thin. On kindred plans, might not a mechanic have devised a very thin mechanism to go into this chest. Oh, I'll admit that the crudeness of the workmanship belies it; but we must consider every possibility."

"But how could such a machine in the lid, strike him in the wrist," I asked. It did seem impossible for we both tried to take a position in which the wrist would be exposed to a blow, and found it unachievable. Dr. Herron merely shook his head at the conclusion of our experiments.

"And how could it deliver a blow against him, and then not strike us when we open it?" This was a puzzling question and I thought it unanswerable, so passed it to Dr. Herron.

"Might not his last act have been to throw out the mechanism so that it would no longer act? Remember,

one must know how to shut off these thief-catchers or himself have no access to the box."

"Which would presuppose that Mr. Oswald knew all about it. Then how get hit," I argued. Of course it was nonsense; the box simply had no room for a mechanism and could not strike a blow from its lid. But if it had, there would have to be a way of controlling those snapping jaws. Dr. Herron insisted that we search. Abe and I had been over it thoroughly and had discovered nothing remotely resembling a set-key. Yet it might be some one of the bosses, or in a slit between the bands, Dr. Herron suggested. I bent to examine closely the inside of the chest.

"It couldn't be within," Dr. Herron admonished. "If it were, how would the owner get at it to set it when he wanted to open the chest after having prepared it for the reception of thieves?"

He would be unable, I admitted. We shut the box and transferred our attention to the outside. There were plenty of openings; in fact, the chest was all openings, in the sense that between every band, where each one crossed, and beneath each boss, were crevices. We explored them all; there was no result. They seemed well filled with dust, but nothing else.

I pulled the chest out from the wall and we looked over the back. We each chose a section and worked over that. Dr. Herron would take a line following a band and examine the mark entirely across the chest. Then come back over the same route to be sure that nothing was missed. I did the same. We found nothing on the rear side, so turned to the front, and then the ends. They were also barren. We then turned it bottom up. I went at it rather weariedly, but the

Doctor exercised the same minute care as in the beginning.

Yet it was I that hit on the first odd feature. The fifth boss examined proved to be loose. I was taken aback. Should I wiggle it? Or pull it out? What would happen if I did? Nothing, probably.

But I decided not to meddle until Dr. Herron had examined it. I pointed it out and he left his end and came to look at the round stud. He moved it back and forth as I had done but did not try to extract it. With a machine injecting curari having disposed of Mr. Oswald, we were taking no chances. If we plucked it forth, would our systems be filled with curari? If we put a knife blade beneath it and pried, would the result be the same?

Dr. Herron was not at a loss for long. From the recess of some pocket, he drew a string. Looping this, he dropped it over the boss and pulled. The string broke. He tried again; same result. The string was not stout enough. I dropped on the floor, unlaced a shoe, drew out the lacing and handed it to him. This was rather thick for the crevice beneath the boss, but by manœuvring for a little time, he succeeded in getting it about the head. At the first pull the boss came out.

There was a sharp click—and nothing happened.

We looked at the rivet-like piece of copper. In appearance it had worn until it no longer had a firm grip on its socket. But what was it that had caused the click? I wanted to poke my finger into the hole to see if anything lay within. Dr. Herron stopped me.

“Nothing like that, with curari about,” he remarked. “Let us now see if the lid is set.”

We turned the chest rightside up and with sticks,

string and other implements, succeeded, after half an hour of nerve-straining effort, in getting the lid opened. Up it came; same old result—nothing happened.

We shut the lid and dropped upon it to rest. It was strenuous work and I was perspiring freely, though outside was one of the coldest days of the winter. I put on my shoe.

“Fooled again,” I sputtered, after I had caught some of my breath and had cooled off a little. “As usual in this case, when we investigate something—nothing happens.”

“Permit me to remind you that we are not yet at the end of our examination,” Dr. Herron remarked. “Let us renew our search of the bottom. That click is yet unexplained.”

Again we turned the chest bottom up. With sticks we prodded the hole without result until Dr. Herron chanced to catch one of the pieces of wood against one of the sections of copper strip between four bosses nearer the center than the one we had taken out. This strip moved sideways a bit and exposed a narrow crack. Again the click. The boss evidently was connected with the movable band.

Dr. Herron attacked it at once; it moved back under his efforts, revealing a section six inches long and four inches wide that slipped to one side. Beneath this was a cavity, slightly smaller than the covering plate, and an inch deep. As the cavity opened, it exposed a folded sheet of note paper; beneath this were several envelopes, lying one upon another.

My eyes glistened, and my hopes sprang to the clouds. Were we at last, really on the trail of the mystery of Mr. Oswald's death? Were we picking up

the key? For the paper on the top was minus one corner!

Was it the same one? What would it and the other letters tell us? Were they put there by Mr. Oswald himself, or by another? Had they any connection with the materializations or were they directly concerned in the taking off of the multimillionaire?

In a flash, stimulated by the sight of the missive, these queries passed before my mind's eye. But nothing disturbed Dr. Herron. He carefully lifted the papers from their resting place and, holding them just as they lay, scanned the cavity to see what it might reveal. One thing was evident at the first glance; the hole was not an old one. The wood was white where the cut had recently been made. Time had not yet laid the searing stroke of its withered hand upon it.

Besides the letters, it contained not a thing. No implement such as might have produced the two wounds in J. Marion Oswald's arm, was to be found. All we gleaned was the bundle of correspondence.

These, too, were not time-stained, time-mellowed, epistles. All were new and fresh-looking; observation of the postmarks on the envelopes brought out that the oldest date was that of only a bit beyond three years back. J. Marion Oswald had not had the chest for more than a few months. The letters could not always have been concealed in this hiding place. For the letters were all addressed to Isobel's father.

The envelopes were plain, common white ones, such as are to be secured in any cheap supply store. Of these there were thirteen, and the thirteenth was folded without the enclosing container. It was the one on top, the sheet without the corner.

I could contain myself no longer. Without a word to Dr. Herron, I dashed to the stairway and hastened down to find Isobel. I wanted to share the discovery with her. A short few months ago I would have sat there until each letter had been opened, read and digested, then rose and rushed—straight to the News office. But the coming of Isobel into my life had changed all that; she was first, last, the whole scope of my life's thought.

I found her, explained our discovery, and together we hurriedly climbed the stairs. Sitting down with Dr. Herron, we went over the letters. A strained look came into Isobel's face as we finished with them; a new worry had settled upon her shoulders.

Then a new thought came to me. Mr. Oswald had warned his daughter not to go near the chest, his remarks leaving her to infer that it was dangerous. And it was—not dangerous for her—but for him. The old box held something that he did not want others to see, though just why I could not understand.

Dr. Herron now insisted on finishing the examination of the bottom of the chest. With this completed, we were able to say that there was no device such as might set a catch to restrain such a weapon as he had described. My first opinions were sustained. Even Dr. Herron admitted that this was no ancient treasure chest such as he had at first supposed.

The Doctor and I had planned to go out to lunch and then further examine the museum; but Isobel would not hear to it; we were to stay with her; after the meal we must call Abe Sullivan. We now had a foothold on the mystery, I was positive; here was something tangible, a direct threat that pointed to some-

one who not only planned to kill J. Marion Oswald but dared to tell him of it. The weird feature was that Mr. Oswald had not said a word to a soul concerning it.

Why? Such action was very unlike him. When the man who had invested in one of his promotion enterprises, and had lost his all, forced his way into the millionaire's office with a gun and had tried to kill him, Mr. Oswald had not been above leaping through the door and rushing down the hall screaming for aid.

Nor, when he got the letters from the anarchist, Sarbotti, had he been at all slow in turning them over to the police. Yet here in his old age, threatened by one he must have known, he not only had not told a living soul, but even had concealed the tangible evidence.

Here, too, we ran across the mysterious "M. E." once more. Twice "M. E." in definite connection with Mr. Oswald had stepped forth from the infinite into this tragedy. Once, when J. Marion Oswald made use of these initials, if he did use them, knowingly, in summoning Deborah; and again, in these missives from an unknown, did "M. E." appear.

We got in touch with Abe and within an hour after we had finished lunch, he was with us. He, too, was alive with information. The questioning of Matthias Erliesbein had borne fruit.

When we were settled about a table in the cozy morning room, Sullivan could contain himself no longer. When I asked, "Well, Abe, what luck with Erliesbein?" he began and poured out the whole development.

"Great, great. He's a regular well of information. What he don't know that is mean about your father,

miss,—and I beg your pardon for repeating it, but I'm telling what he tells," Abe nodded apologetically, "hasn't been invented yet. To hear him tell it, Mr. Oswald must have had cloven feet, a spiked tail, and ate fire and brimstone. He very freely admitted that if he had had an opportunity, he would have killed your father. But the farther he got from the event that roused his rage, the less inclined was he to seek actively to injure your father. Had a sudden chance presented itself, the story might have been different."

Sullivan paused, restlessly. I recognized the symptoms; he badly felt the need of a cigar. I had no right or desire to suggest that he smoke; it did not occur to Isobel that he might wish to enjoy his weed; so he had to get along the best he could, periodically reaching toward the pocket where he carried his cigars, and as often remembering and putting down his hand without touching them.

"It isn't what he did; it is what he said that put us on the track," Abe went on. "As his hatred for Mr. Oswald became widely known, his place became a resort for anyone and everyone with a grudge against your father. They could hang out here and be sure of a sympathetic hearing. The tales he told us! There was no bother about making him come across. He was proud of the long and bitter rage he had cherished against Mr. Oswald, and made no bones about telling all he knew and had heard. There is no use rehearsing to you all those he recalled who had made threats against J. Marion Oswald. The stenographer has all the notes and each one will be investigated; but he told one instance that struck me as peculiar."

Abe thought a moment while choosing his words.

“Just one week before your father was found dead, there was some violent speaking in Erliesbein’s saloon. While those who threatened had not known your father personally, Miss Oswald, they were in a rage at social injustice. So they were breathing threats. As they talked, a cripple was seated at one of the tables, listening and smiling at their fervid remarks. When they left, he crawled to his feet and hobbled to the bar, his crutches clumping as he dragged his bent and twisted form along. ‘They don’t like our friend Oswald, do they?’ and he nodded in the direction of the men who had just passed out. ‘Well, he has but a short time before he will be called to answer,’ and stumped his way out. Now Erliesbein claims he had never seen the cripple before, nor has seen him since. But his threat coming so aptly, has impressed the old man; he thinks that this fellow was concerned in your father’s death. I agree with him. When we get this cripple, for get him we will,—a cripple is easily traced; the police note each one as a possible beggar—we’ll find out why he knew so much about J. Marion Oswald’s death a full week before it occurred.”

It looked to me more like a lucky guess on the part of the cripple, than premeditation. Abe had been so sure that when Erliesbein had been made to talk, he would have the key; possibly he would contend that he did have it in this unknown cripple.

“Now Abe, if you’ll listen a moment, Dr. Herron will tell you what we did and what *we* found,” and I indicated the Doctor, who took the bunch of letters from his pocket and spread them upon the table, arranging them in a row before him.

CHAPTER XIII.

SPECIAL DELIVERY STAMPS.

THE narration of how the letters were found I left entirely in the hands of Cyrus Herron. It was through his efforts that they were discovered, and that, through his insight, the very first object investigated, had yielded such excellent returns. It was part of the strange whirligig we know as life, that Sullivan could spend hours and days in the same room, part of the time aided by me, and get no results; then Cyrus Herron, by a little close work, resurrected the letters. Such is the experience of a newswriter; he goes out and works for hours and doesn't get enough for a single stick; along comes a cub, goes over the same ground and tumbles into a situation that starts the chief rushing the whole staff out to cover it.

In his narrative Dr. Herron omitted nothing of importance. He had an eye for detail and a knowledge of how to tell his story. He began with a discussion of treasure chests, which explained his unceremonious handling of myself, to which he alluded. He admitted the erroneous impression he had received of the chest, but as he told of my fancied peril, Isobel turned her eyes, filled with reproach, in my direction.

His description of why we felt it necessary to go over the chest, how we did the work, and the results, were put before Sullivan with no waste of words.

"I am certain," he remarked, in conclusion, "that my friend Larry joins with me in attributing their discovery to luck. We were not looking for a secret hiding place, but for a possible means to shut off a murderous device which, quite wrongly, we thought was concealed in the chest. It was but chance that led us to turn to this one relic, among the thousands, before we did any other. The finding of these letters was luck, purely and simply luck; luck brought them to light."

"Give me a little of such luck, then," commented the detective as the doctor concluded.

"On the opening of the hiding-place and the bringing to light of these letters, Larry did not wait to examine the find, but rushed down stairs, returning very shortly with Miss Oswald. We looked them over, after which she invited us to dinner and here we are. For my part, I regret that my time in your city is so limited; I greatly fear that all I can do is to take a hasty glance through the museum, and hurry away to my train."

"If you keep on at this rate, we'll write *finis* on this case tonight, for you'll have the murderer under lock and key, and there'll be nothing left for me to do." Abe shook his head, half mournfully. Then he leaned forward in his chair and extended his hand.

"But what is in the letters? That's what counts. If you'll please hand them to me," and he looked at the doctor.

Cyrus Herron complied. He had arranged the letters in chronological order, using the date on each envelope, as the enclosed documents bore none. These had been mailed at average intervals of three months. The one

that had been on the top of the pile, the sheet without the corner, we inferred was the special delivery sent to Mr. Oswald's home. The absence of the envelope was thus explained. In making his complaint, he had taken it to the postoffice and had left it there as the regulations request.

The first letter had been received in July a little over three years before; since that time, one had never failed to arrive approximately three months later. The postmarks showed that there was no exact or fixed day for their sending.

While Sullivan was looking them over, before reading, Dr. Herron called our attention to this feature and attributed it to the motive of "suspense."

"If this first letter struck a chord of, say, apprehension, in Mr. Oswald's bosom, and it seems that such rightfully may be inferred from his concealment of the messages, then he would always be looking forward to the next one, with the greatest anxiety. Had the sender mailed them regularly, Mr. Oswald would soon have grasped their periodicity and between times would rest in comparative peace. But the fact that they were sent so irregularly, that any day, every day, might bring one, made each day a day of fear. Yet the dates show that they averaged about four a year."

Studying the envelopes, Abe made out what we already knew. They were of cheap paper, plain, and each bore, in addition to the ordinary two-cent stamp, a special delivery stamp. There was no return address, nor were the letters signed. All were mailed in Chicago.

The first had been mailed July 8, and the envelope bore the triangular dots in one corner; these corresponding with the description of the special mark on

certain letters he was not to open, given by Mr. Oswald's secretary. The marks were very distinctly made, the one in the center being largest. This scheme of having a certain one larger than the others was not followed in the triangles printed on the other envelopes; it could not have been a distinctive characteristic.

All this information was gathered by Sullivan in a few seconds, and having exhausted the enclosing case, he turned his attention to the enclosures. This first message, that of July 8, was simple; too simple; we failed to understand it. All the single sheet contained was the head of a serpent drawn with wide open mouth and with very long fangs. This was in pencil, and not very well done. It was plainly evident that lines had been erased and redrawn, not once, but several times.

The second letter had been mailed August 29 and its message was still more simple. It bore the single word Marian, with a skull in pencil beneath the name. Marian was written with a typewriter.

The letters continued to come with great irregularity, but averaging the three months apart as Dr. Herron had pointed out; and each one added a bit more than the last. On the fourth received was a headstone bearing the initials, "M. E." After that, nearly every one had some reference to some person whose first and last names began with those letters. It was this same fourth letter that contained the first open threat. "Death to devils," was written with a machine at the bottom of the sheet.

After the first picture of a snake's head, there was no reference to a reptile until the sixth letter. Here again was drawn a serpent's forepart, with fangs pro-

truding, and the missive asked, "Remember the Serpent's Fangs?"

From then on, gradually the letters became more explicit in their threatening tone. It was the last one that almost told him the exact day he was to die. Almost—but not quite. It was short.

"M. E.—Remember—M. E. Down through the Fangs of the Serpent; down through you. Think you that you have escaped? Long have you gloated, but the end draws nigh. Count the days as you made M. E. count them. Count them for the end. And as you count you shall walk once again through the Jaws of the Se——." The rest was missing.

Though the corner I had picked up was now in the possession of the district attorney, none of us had any doubt that when placed against the corner of this sheet, it would fit perfectly. So the word was not "repent," as we had assumed.

"Bombastic," commented Abe as he finished with this. "Not very different from the warning Deborah gave. Now I wonder——" and he paused in thought. Was he thinking, as was I, that if these messages were written by the one who killed J. Marion Oswald, that what Deborah said was of no moment; they were not composed by the same person. Or had he started to make a remark that would have hurt Isobel?

Poor Isobel! Hers was a difficult position. She looked tired and sick. And who would not? Yet not for a moment had she lost faith in her father.

"I am sure that this is the writing of some crack-brained individual," she addressed both Abe and Herron, "who thinks that in some deal with father, he, himself, or the mysterious M. E. was wronged. Father

had to stand so much of undeserved censure. It is one of the penalties the great pay for their success. The little, the jealous, the weak, making up the great mass of the unsuccessful, grow sullen with hate; and someone among them, less well balanced but more revengeful, is not above committing murder."

"That may be very true," commented Dr. Herron. None of us could be free in making comments on the letters, or the motives which might have induced their writing, in the presence of Isobel. Still more we refrained from discussing acts of J. Marion Oswald which would induce him to hide such letters as these and calmly submit to a decree of death; for that was what we surmised the letters were intended to convey. Dr. Herron was continuing.

"The general character of these letters is euphuistic. They lack smoothness, cohesion. About the only admirable trait revealed is determination; and in this case it is used to an ulterior purpose."

"Yes," assented Abe as he fingered the letters before him, "reads like a Laura Jean Libbey romance. Innocent girl, rich villain, noble-hearted lover, and all the rest."

"Oh, but you don't think that M. E. was a woman, do you?" Isobel was quick to take up his slip. She regarded him fixedly. She saw it in his face. Abe was cornered; no use entering a denial; he had to admit it. Besides, there was the second letter.

Abe picked this up, from those before him, reached over and handed it to her.

"What do you make of the 'Marian' there, Miss Oswald?" he asked.

She stammered. Yet not in confusion. Her eyes voiced the blow she had received.

“‘Marian’? Why, I thought it was father; I read ‘Marion.’”

“But all this is beside the question,” Abe returned, as she finished speaking. In the kindness of his heart he wished to spare her further revelations and he brought the conversation back to a safer subject. “It doesn’t help us find the writer of the letters. But when we do, I’m thinking then we’ll find your father’s murderer. Though we’ve got another lead, too, through the cripple Erliesbein told us about.”

“How will you set about finding the writer,” Dr. Herron inquired. “This is entirely outside my field and I would be lost working out such a matter.”

Abe took the letters before him and spread them out. Now he was going to show how a detective worked—according to popular conception; how they did *not* work, as I knew from experience. He bluffed.

“Paper—h’m—envelopes—common, common—nothing to go by except their very commonness. Pencil used;—for drawing only—too cautious—nothing there. Messages typed both as to address and the letters. H’m—Densmore?—Yes, pretty sure. Yep—Densmore. Helps some; guilty party owns or has access to a Densmore. Nothing in the messages to give him away. No address, no locality named. Only hint M. E. and name Marian. Probably Marian E. Who was she?—Can we find out? Must run through my ‘M. E.’ list again and check for special work with those of first name Marian. Rest of stuff queer. Rattlesnake—don’t know what it means. Wonder if any connection

with group in the museum. Type—h'm—let's see—wish I had a microscope.”

Dr. Herron raised his eyebrows in surprise. I could follow his thoughts as though he spoke them. “A detective without a microscope! He cannot be very efficient; they always carry them.”

It was just a remark on Abe's part, but Isobel took it as a hint. She rang for Tasker and when he appeared instructed him to fetch one from the library. Tasker returned almost immediately and handed the instrument, at her directions, to the detective. Abe took it and fingered it a moment as though studying out a problem; and he was; he was figuring out how to use the miserable thing. Finally he adjusted it, and studied the letter for some time in silence. Then, having thought up something to say, based on such detective stories as he had read, he went on.

“Not much here; too little to go on. The paper is so porous the ink spreads. Can't make out all the defective letters. Looks as though the 'e' were worn badly at the bottom; and the 'a' is broken just below the cross line. Can't be sure though. Take too long to find anyone by looking up every Densmore owner; he'd get wind of it, too, and skip. Just do for reference when he's found. What else have we got?” Just as if he really used such a method, he went over the letters and envelopes again.

“H'm—all the same size.” Referring to the envelopes. “Couple of finger marks. Most likely those of postoffice clerk. Might be those of any of us, just as well. No value anyway; too much smeared. All have ordinary stamp, also a special. That may help. Most folks, under the department's permission, use

ordinary two-centers, putting on five additional. Not many special delivery stamps sold any more. Let's see—where were they mailed? H'm—first one—main office. That's bad. Next one at Station P—and the next—and the next,—yes, and the next. Here's a change—the sixth was mailed at Station V;—yes, and the rest were mailed from there, too. Our man must have moved about two years ago. Got into a neighborhood and has used the nearest postoffice ever since. Careless of him—careless. If he did," he added as a second thought.

"Maybe it's a blind. Looks as though he came from a small burg and thought a big city like Chicago would cover him. Seems to have done well, except that one thing. Suppose I see what we can do with that," and he fell to gathering up the letters. "I'll have to take possession of these and turn them over to the D. A.'s office. Do you want to come along?" and he looked at Cyrus Herron and me.

No, we did not. Dr. Herron desired to revisit the museum and I was to accompany him. Abe left.

"Oh, Mr. Bowen," Isobel remarked after he had gone and we had risen, Dr. Herron and I, preparatory to ascending to the fourth floor. "Can't you remain with me while Dr. Herron goes up under Tasker's care? I do not know what to think. I want to talk over these things that have come up. Please stay."

Stay?—Of course I would. Dr. Herron said he could get along very nicely without my aid, and the butler took him away. It was rather late when he finished, but he had found nothing more that was suspicious. He too agreed with Abe and me that the weapon was not in the room.

We returned to my rooms, went out and got a meal, after which I left him to go back and get his bag. He was going out on the Soo's 11:30 P.M. train. I had to prepare for the News a report on the day's discoveries; so I hastened down to the office.

Next afternoon I went around to Abe's office to find out what he had accomplished. This was very little, he told me. He arrived at Station V just before closing time. Sullivan knew the clerk at the window and after greeting him, asked if he sold many special delivery stamps.

"Not any more," he was told. "Since ordinary stamps answer the same purpose, nearly everyone makes use of them; they are much more convenient."

"Then, perhaps you have regular customers who buy them. Do you remember any who have this habit," Abe asked.

"Possibly? Why do you want to know?"

Abe explained at some length, though not fully; merely enough so that the young man understood that the apprehension of a criminal depended upon the knowledge.

"I am sorry," the clerk had replied; "I may have the information you are seeking, but our rules are strict. I cannot tell you unless the Postmaster instructs me to do so."

Sullivan didn't argue. The clerk was obeying the regulations. But it was exasperating. It meant a day lost. He must journey to the main office, see the postmaster, get his permission, then come back and start all over again. It was now so late in the day that there was small chance of catching the big man in; that meant, go in the morning. Then when he had

the consent of the chief official, he must return to Station V; the same clerk would not then be on duty. The question would have to be put to another; he might, or might not, know; but anyway, Abe knew he must see both.

There was no other course to take, so Abe took it. While he assumed that the writer lived within the district closely contiguous to the Station, this was by no means certain. Even if it were, Abe could not subject everyone in that region to the third degree.

There were but three things to go on, each one decidedly weak; even this, the attempt to locate the man who purchased the special delivery stamps, being a "long shot." Of course there was a possible fourth: Deborah. But was she material or spiritual? We had not as yet settled this. Which left but three things we actually knew.

The second concerned an "M. E." We might have taken the whole city, studying every name in the Directory with those initials, and have called upon them all; or if one had a first name "Marian" have gone deeply into her history. The first chance, or the last, as to how it was viewed, was in finding a cripple who corresponded with the description given by Matthias Erliesbein. But to look up all the crippled in Chicago and pick out a certain one, was a task beyond Sullivan's powers.

"We've dallied along on this case for weeks," he complained, after he had finished his tale of his troubles over the special delivery stamps, "without getting any new light except that shed through the spirit Deborah. That is pretty fluky. Now we really have our hands

on something that will lead us to the information we need," he concluded more cheerfully.

Abe's big idea was to get somebody and make him talk. He had brought in Matthias Erliesbein, but as Abe growled, he had talked too much, given too much information. Still Sullivan could not break the habits and the training of years; his methods demanded someone from whom to drag the facts required. I had a hunch that no one was going to talk in this case; that if we found out how J. Marion Oswald died, we'd discover it ourselves. As well-planned and well-executed a slaying as this, meant that no weakminded individual was going to come forward and tell all about it.

Abe now had the permission of the Postmaster and the latter's instructions to the clerk; I went with him back to Station V. This time there was an older man on duty at the window. After the matter was explained to him, he did not even wait for the word from his superior. He, too, knew Abe and was willing to take a chance. But of course he did not need to, for Sullivan gave the authority of the Postmaster for his request.

About special delivery stamps: Yes, there were a few sales. The D. and S. Company came in every month and purchased a large number, but he didn't suppose we'd want that. There were few regulars. Old James Oglethorpe always insisted on specials. Miss Tabitha Dobson was a second. There were many he didn't know. There was a cripple who came in occasionally and bought a single special. But he supposed he was out of the question. There was a girl——

Abe interrupted. This cripple;—how was he injured; what was his trouble?

"Oh," the clerk replied, "he looks as though he is suffering from rheumatism; he is all drawn over. He walks with crutches. His back is a great bow."

Abe and I recalled Erliesbein's description. Was this the same man? The clerk continued naming others, but I paid little attention. When he had finished, Abe thanked him and we withdrew. Abe was not keen for waiting until the other clerk came in. He felt he had something before him now, and remarked that he had better act on what he had, and locate the man with the bent back.

"That's our man," Sullivan told me as we left the lobby. "I feel it in my bones. There can hardly be two men in Chicago as badly bent as the one Erliesbein saw; yet here we have such a one. I'm going out to spread the drag net. Someone on the force must have seen him, and will recognize his description. But if not, we'll comb the district, gradually broadening the circle. We'll find him if he is still here; and if he has left, we'll uncover his trail. Leave it to me. When we find our man, I'll send for you."

Late that evening I went down to report progress to Isobel. It took longer than I anticipated and it was near midnight when I left. As I hopped out of the taxi at the office, I noticed a figure pass in front of me, going west. I paid little attention for just then, there amid the snow-clad streets of Chicago, I suddenly recalled the woodland as it looked in autumn up on my aunt's farm in Wisconsin. It was wonderful. Nothing had met my eye to rouse such memories, but the mental picture was vivid; the colors, the sounds, the scents, were before me just as though I stood again in the shady, open spot among the trees.

The memory was fading from my mind, growing less clear, as I sped up the steps. When, just as I was entering, there flashed into my mind the fact that I had received the same impression on the day of the funeral of Mr. Oswald. And what had brought it about? A subtle perfume.

With this odor I had associated a woman in a heavy black veil. Then memory, spurred to action, recalled the faint whiff of perfume that had reached me as the figure passed; and now;—I saw it all—even when Deborah had appeared, I had sensed it.

I turned and dashed down the steps, but there was no one in sight, in either direction. The figure had been moving west. I hurried to the next corner in that direction and looked up and down the cross street. Other than a few men moving in the distance, there was no one in sight; the garbed figure for whom I searched had disappeared. As there were a hundred places into which she might have gone, I recognized the futility of further pursuit. Figuratively, I kicked myself for a chump. Why had I not grasped the connection between the perfume and the figure at once? But, after all, had that odor any connection with Mr. Oswald and his passing to the shadow world? Was I getting into such a condition that everything and everyone suggested the one who had administered the curari?

I went to bed wondering if it were not all a part of a waking dream, a hallucination induced by thinking and studying over and over the possibilities connected with this case. Would I find that a perfume had been a factor in the death of J. Marion Oswald, or would Abe bring in a cripple as the murderer?

The task of running to earth the purchaser of the

special delivery stamps was fraught with no great difficulties. It was shortly after five that evening, but a few hours after I had completed my season of rest, that I was called to the phone. As I took down the receiver, and sang out "Hello," Abe's voice rolled over the wires.

"Come down at once; we've got the man."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WRITER OF THE LETTERS.

SO Abe had the man. This might mean that he already was in "durance vile," as common folk prefer to think of being "jugged," or in the "hoosgow"; or it might mean that his location was known and that he was under surveillance. In either alternative, I could see the end of the case, if the man indeed were the murderer. And it looked as though he were. He must have a connection with the letters, and they threatened death.

Headlines such as, "Sleuth Sullivan Solves Secret"; "J. Marion Oswald's Slayer Seized"; these and a score of others passed before my mental vision. "News Man Finds the Key," seemed about the way the chief would run it.

There was no dallying on my part, even though I did think a thought or two; if there was anything about the mystery of Mr. Oswald's death that I missed, there would be news for me at the chief's desk.

Over the wire Sullivan had told me to come to the police quarters nearest Postal Station V. I arrived in record time, only to find that there was no need for such haste. While the cripple was surrounded in his rooms, he was not taken as yet. We were waiting for a representative from the criminal branch of the district attorney's office, who was to be present at the

raid. While sitting in the station until the lawyer appeared, Abe gave me what information had been dug up.

"We found him easy enough. He hasn't made any secret of his existence. The patrolman knows him well, says he is so badly crippled with rheumatism that he doesn't see how the man walks at all; he just manages to stump about on his crutches. Agreeable, kindly fellow, apparently; he always has a joke or a smile for the man on the beat. Probably a blind, though."

As he talked, Abe looked me over, as though searching for a gun, but none showed.

"Aren't you armed?" he asked in some surprise. "You sure ought to have a 'gat.' A man that uses curari can't be allowed any leeway. This may be a life and death tussle for some of us. Just suppose that, as we burst in, he lets drive a handful of spikes with their tips dipped in that dope! Nice thing for a man with a family to think of, isn't it!"

It was not. Nor was Sullivan thinking of it; it was just his way of warning me of the danger we ran. No matter what they do or don't do in other matters, Chicago policemen do not hang back in desperate situations. "Don't think; act," is their motto. A good one too, for the fellow they are after is just as scared as they would be if they stopped to think. But then, they are not supposed to cogitate; that is the news-writer's business. I was the one that got the shivers. Just then the representative from the criminal department came in; we started.

The cripple had a suite of rooms on the second floor of the "Maid of Orleans" flat. He could not be in the penurious class; such unfortunates never even got in-

side those doors. We found the place well guarded. Where the suspected murderer of J. Marion Oswald was involved, the police were taking no chances; he should not get away if they could help it.

We entered together: Abe, Smyte, the district attorney's man, I and three common cops. They were along so that if the cripple got nasty, they would get the first dose of curari. What d'ye suppose our magnificent municipality is paying them their princely salaries for?

There was no need nor attempt at concealment as yet. The more openly the matter was conducted, the better chance we had to get the man. It was nearly seven o'clock but the hall was brilliantly lighted. Abe and one of the patrolmen went ahead up the stairs and past the door of the cripple's room, which was known to the officers; the two other men came next; theirs was the duty of hurling themselves against the door, and rushing the place. Knock? Ask permission to enter? Not with a curari murderer, said Abe.

I and Smyte were behind. We were yet on the stairs, but had a good view of the door to the man's room,—this was in the right wall, and the second beyond the landing—when the two policemen arrived opposite the cripple's doorway. Walking close to the wall, they turned and as one dashed at the entrance. One reached forth, grasped and turned the knob; the door flew open; it was not even locked. Nearly falling, but alert, they sprawled into the room. Their clubs were in their hands, but there was no occasion to use them.

The room was brightly lighted, but held no human occupants. Abe and the other man had rushed back and Smyte and I hurried up. The two police who had

entered paused when they saw that no one was in the chamber; the rest of us followed them into the room, then stood at attention, scanning every corner. In the silence came a tap, tap, tap, tap, from some adjoining space. Even as we listened, a form appeared at the doorway in the far wall. I had one glance ere the police acted. That was enough.

A cripple? Why the man was nearly helpless, so great was his deformity. Two thin legs, bent and twisted, supported a body so bowed that the man never looked up. His back was drawn over into a huge bow, his chin touching his chest. Only by his crutches could he hold himself erect.

The officers took not a chance. As he appeared, like a well-trained football squad, they hurled themselves upon him. The crutches went flying and in a minute they rose, puffing slightly, and left the manacled form on the floor. His hands were ironed in front of him; so bent was he that they could not get them behind his back; his legs were securely fastened.

"What is the meaning of this?" came in faint, though gentle tones from the body on the floor.

"Keep still," growled Abe, then to the two officers, "Pick him up and put him on the couch." They did so.

The search of the premises which ensued was one of the most thorough I have ever seen, and I have been in on several. Smyte and I stayed in the first room with the prisoner; he never said a word during the entire examination. The three officers under Abe's direction, poked into every drawer, crevice, every utensil; nothing escaped them. And all they found—a Densmore typewriter. As they finished, they returned to the room where we were. Abe brought the machine.

"I'm going to see if this is the one that wrote the notes," he remarked grimly, as he set it on a table and drew up a chair. We watch him insert a sheet of paper; click, click, click,—in silence he picked off the letters. He had brought with him one of the letters found in the chest, and was using this as a copy. He finished, drew out the sheet he had written, and laid it beside the other; as he looked them over, a look of disappointment overspread his features, and he shook his head.

"Not like it at all. Can see that at a glance." As Abe made the remark, a chuckle came from the couch.

"Foiled you, didn't I? I had the type changed several weeks ago."

With a start we turned and looked at the cripple. The man went on.

"If you'll let me sit up, perhaps we can get this mess straightened out."

Smyte looked at Abe and nodded. Sullivan, with one of the officers, placed the poor wreck in such a position that, by peering up under his eyebrows, he could look at us. But to do this, he had to lie flat on his back. This pitiable creature the murderer of Mr. Oswald? I could not believe it.

Sullivan removed none of the irons, nor did the man ask it. Yet he smiled bravely, cheerfully, almost with satisfaction, I thought.

"No need for me to pretend I do not know why you are here," he remarked without any preface. "I do. I followed the case in the papers and knew that you had found the letters. But I scarcely expected you so soon. Yes, I know why you have come. You think I had a hand in the death of that hell-hound, Oswald. I didn't,

but by God, I wish I had." There was rage and bitterness in his tones.

"See here, old man, you are under arrest for that very murder. Better tell us who helped you in it."

There was no thought in Abe's mind of warning him that what he said would be used against him. Get him to talk was Abe's idea; and he well knew that the best time was just after an arrest, when the victim is shocked and disturbed, and has had no time to think. This case ranked so high in importance that the district attorney wished first hand information of what was done and said; hence the presence of Smyte.

"Who wrote those letters?" The question was sudden.

The cripple did not pretend to misunderstand Abe.

"I did," he admitted with pride. Then with a laugh that had a world of bitterness, he added: "And I hope they made that cur pass many an anxious hour. Then he slipped away from me at last, damn him," and he added a string of curses. "Say, if I believed in a literal hell, I'd do everything under the sun to go there so as to see that devil suffer, as he made others suffer."

Mr. Oswald must have had a great faculty for making the most deadly of enemies; Erliesbein cursing him all his life; this man, bitter at even the thought of him, now that he was gone; and heaven knows how many hundreds of others scattered about the world.

"What did you kill him for?" demanded Abe.

"I didn't," he replied again.

"Where did you get the curari?" Abe came back at him.

"Never had any; don't know where to get it."

"Where did you get the serpent poison?" Abe gave him not a moment to think.

"The serpent poison?"—in surprise; then—"Oh, I see," and he chuckled. "Say," he went on, "ease me up a bit and I'll tell you the whole story."

This was what Sullivan and Smyte were fishing for, but their faces showed no signs of their elation; usually it took hours of questioning to bring it to pass, but here—it had taken but a few minutes. Doubts began to loom up in my mind; it had come too easily.

Abe sent one of the officers into another room after pillows and with them propped up the poor creature into as comfortable a position as he could find. Smyte, who was also a stenographer, prepared to take down the cripple's story.

"My name is Lionel Marsh." This was the name he had been using, so it might be his real one, or it might be a title adopted years ago. That we would find out later.

"I am fifty-eight years of age. I was not always in this terrible shape, but rheumatism, contracted while in prison walls where that beast had placed me, got me, and gradually it crept farther and farther into my muscles, finally pulling me into this mockery of the human form. When I was a young man I fell in love with one of the finest women God ever made. Oh, yes," and he nodded at Abe, "there is a woman in the story."

"We lived in the village of Two Rocks, in the central part of Wisconsin. We were simple village folk, plodding along with little. Marian Ellarson taught the school in a country district four miles from Two Rocks. I clerked in the village hardware store. You aren't interested in our lovemaking; so I simply will

say that for two years we had been engaged, striving with might and main to get enough ahead so we could marry. But we couldn't do it. I got only nine dollars a week, and old Jerome, the owner of the store, really could not afford to pay more; some weeks he had not that much for himself. With eight months' school at twenty a month, poor Marian could not save a cent, either. Things looked hopeless.

"Then came the branch factory of the Tangent Packing Company, locating in Two Rocks. Here was our chance. I got a job at once and when her school term was ended, Marian, too, entered the employ of the company, finding a berth in the office. No use of my following us through the next few months. After that, something happened. Of course I didn't get all the facts as I tell them to you now, in the precise order in which they happened, but you'll grasp my story better if I tell them as I understand their sequence.

"It wasn't very long before the company, at their main office, discovered that the Two Rocks branch wasn't making as much money as it should. Yet the volume of business was larger than had been expected. They let it run along for five months, then decided to investigate the matter.

"That is where that heartless beast, old Oswald, came in. Only he wasn't so old then. Of course I didn't know it, but he was the principal stockholder of the American Packing Company. He decided to take a little vacation and look into the matter himself. He didn't come down with flying colors and trot around as J. Marion Oswald. Not he; he was known only to one man, the manager of the plant; to the rest he was

Howard Davis, and before long it leaked out that he was a detective.

"Oh, we were curious. A detective in our small town was an innovation. Everyone wanted to see him. He seemed to make little progress and no wonder, for the real thief was the manager himself, though I didn't find this out until long after. Davis, as we knew him, had a place in the office; ostensibly he was a new clerk; a big blind that, when we all thought we knew him as a detective.

"In his new place he was thrown much in contact with Marian. Now I wasn't jealous. I loved her and she loved me. The little, gentlemanly attentions he paid her, and of which she told me at times, didn't worry me.

"That was just the way of the beast. He acted in an open, apparently honorable manner, posing all the while as a single man, though for fifteen years he had been married. Sometimes he walked home with her; on several occasions he asked her to accompany him to various places, but had been quietly refused. But he was persistent. I could not always be at Marian's side, and he was such a gentleman that once or twice she did go with him; once for a buggy-ride one Sunday afternoon. And his behavior was perfect, outwardly, damn him; but underneath he had already plotted his deviltry. He had learned that I was Marian Ellarson's accepted lover.

"Why drag it out? He stayed and stayed; couldn't seem to find the hole through which the money had escaped. This gave the manager time to save his own hide. The next thing I knew I was arrested and Davis had such a clean case against me that they were going

to give me fifteen years; fifteen years—God!—for something I never did.”

For some moments Marsh cursed Oswald in a fluent and picturesque vocabulary. But he quieted down, shortly, and resumed.

“See his fine Italian hand now! Marian went to him and interceded for me; and he came to me and told me he would do everything he could to lighten my sentence, if I would plead guilty. He knew I wasn’t bad at heart and so on. Bad at heart?—Hell, I was as innocent of the crime as a babe unborn. I told him so and that I would not plead guilty to something I had not done. And I told Marian the same thing. But they had doctored the books so that I could not escape. Even my own mother thought I was guilty, that I was doing it to get money to marry Marian.

“I got five years and the judge, in imposing sentence, remarked that it was only on the intercession of the detective, Mr. Davis, that I was let off so lightly; he, the judge, was minded to make it what I deserved, fifteen years. I was taken away. But Davis, as he was known to everyone, didn’t leave at once. He consoled with Marian, walked home with her more often, and constituted himself her special protector.

“Poor girl, her cup was full. I had been sent away under conditions that, she could not but believe, pointed to my guilt. The people of the village, with nothing else to do, began to speculate as to whether Marian might not have had a hand in it, too.

“Her friends began to leave her, all except Davis; he was ever present. Then, in a month, he said his detective duties called him elsewhere, and he left, but returned for a visit every two weeks; and Marian was

the one he came to see. He began to make desperate love to her and she, poor soul, with almost no one in the village to go to, everyone thinking ill of her, was glad of some one to talk to, even at the price of lovemaking. Besides, remember that he always had been the perfect gentleman; and she had lost me, and had seen her friends slipping away from her.

"Before long she got to going to meet him in neighboring towns. All perfectly innocent: Why have the people of Two Rocks know all about who her visitors were, and what they did? Yet he came to Two Rocks, too, whenever he could, he told her. At last, nearly a year after I had gone to prison, she gave herself to him. His story was that, while he appeared a single man, he had an insane wife in the hopeless ward of the state hospital. I've since found that actually there was a woman there by the name of Davis to whom he used to send money and visit. I believe that Marian visited the place and saw for herself. Either he had hired some one to be Mrs. Davis, or there was such a person, and through bribes, he slipped in as her real husband.

"So Marian consented to go with him and to marry him when his wife died. I know that sounds bad, but don't blame the poor girl. She was human, loving and lovable, and craved companionship, care, attention; these he gave her. Maybe the old hellion should have his dues; perhaps he did love Marian a little. Anyway, he fixed up a little place for her away off in one corner of the state and kept visiting her for more than five years. As Detective Davis, his long absences were easily explained. And to Marian he was always Davis. She died thinking that was his name.

"I got out in a little over three years. I rushed back

to Two Rocks, hoping to find a trace of Marian, for I knew that she had left the village. No one had any knowledge of her whereabouts. Even at this time I had no suspicion that Davis had fixed up the evidence to convict me. No, I never did find either Davis or Marian. But Oswald I did.

"But after much inquiry, I did hear of her marriage, as I supposed, to Davis. And I, supposing him to be decent—hadn't he proved it, the scoundrel, by his asking the judge to let me off easy?—conceded to him the full right to win her, as he had. Who was I, a jailbird, to expect a normal young woman to wait for me? Though I longed to see her again, and though I was constantly on the lookout, hoping by chance to meet her, I ceased active endeavors to locate them.

"Before I did so, I had inquired at the plant for Davis. Though this was still running, no one knew where he was. The manager had left a year previous to my return. Him I found.

"I know that what I now have to tell sound fishy, but you can investigate for yourselves, if you doubt it. After all, he had a lot on his conscience and the sudden sight of me in his weak state brought on the hemorrhage from which he died. He was in the last stages of tuberculosis and as I walked in on him he raised up with a shriek and pushed violently away with his hands, crying, 'No, no, I didn't do it. He fixed the evidence and I had to keep still. He'd have sent me up if I interfered. No, no, I didn't do it. Keep away. He did it, he did it!' His fear and emotion were terrible to witness and his agitation brought on a rush of blood from the mouth. He collapsed and died before I could summon assistance. I was dumbfounded. I had taken in

only a part of what he said. When he shouted 'He', I understood Davis, though doubtless he meant Oswald, as he knew the two were the same person. Had I had an opportunity to question him, I would have found this out, but I arrived too late.

"No, as I said, I never did find Marian. But shortly before she died, she came to me; she had kept track of me, and later she told me all the story as I have given it to you, beyond what I know of myself.

"He kept coming to see her, as I said, for almost five years. Then, when she needed him most, six months before her child was born, he deserted her. The devilish, unfeeling brute, to think he slipped out of my hands!

"The child came with her all alone in the house save for a neighbor. Never a cent did he send her. As soon as she was able, yes, even sooner, she was forced to find work. What can a woman with a baby get to do? She had to place the girl, for it was a female child, with a poor family. Because of the nature of her employment, she could visit them but seldom; they finally moved away and she lost all trace of them.

"The years passed: I became prosperous, but I never married. Marian became old and bent with toil, wrinkled with premature age; but she never forgot me. In her last days she drifted down to Two Rocks and to me. No one knew her for the Marian Ellarson of old. Poor sweetheart, her time had come; she passed away in my arms, but she believed till the end that Davis, who was really Oswald, had met with an accident.

"How did I find him? Simplest thing in the world. The earth is not big enough to hide such a creature

from the man who hates as I hated. I was at the stock show here in Chicago four years ago, and I saw J. Marion Oswald. Though the years had changed him mightily, I knew him. But there was much to learn. One does not lightly accuse a multimillionaire of the crimes with which I would charge this devil. No, I had much work to do. It was not much of a task to establish the connection of the Tangent Packing Company with him. By the use of a photograph, somewhat altered, I proved that Oswald was Davis, and as the latter had paid periodical visits to a small town in southwestern Wisconsin. Now came my time to make him suffer.

“But the rheumatism I had contracted while confined in the damp cells of the prison, had been growing worse year by year, and now seized me in a terrible grip from which I emerged as you see me. But I made up my mind that it should not hinder me; and it did not.

“I had my plans all made. That was why I had the letters on the typewriter changed. After I had done it, I was not minded to pay the penalty. Within a very short time, had he lived, J. Marion Oswald would have gone to a most horrible death. I can tell you all this because, damn him, he escaped me.

“Still, I have one consolation. How he must have dreaded every mail. I planned the letters so that each one hinted a little more of his crimes; and so that every day he would look for a message. But it would not come. Long, long he'd wait and think, ‘Something has happened; not again will I get one of the letters.’ Then, down one would drop. Oh, I wrung his soul. Didn't I see him quit his active office work and retire

to his home to escape me? Yes, the slimy devil, he did, too. Killed himself to get away from the letters.

"Why," he added after a moment's pause, "even the three dots I put on the envelopes must have bothered him. And they meant nothing. As I had the first letter ready to mail, I was thinking of us three—'the eternal triangle'—and absentmindedly placed three dots in a triangle on the face of the message. But I let it go. Ever after that each one bore the triangle; he learned to recognize it, all right."

He stopped; his recital was done. The telling had been continuous; the story was complete. Yet there were many gaps. Still, for me it had all the earmarks of truth. No one could concoct a tale that would stand up when exposed to the scrutiny this one would receive.

And he, too, considered Mr. Oswald a suicide. I wondered how he would account for the absence of the weapon. But all this little interested Sullivan. He still *might* catch the man in a misstatement and prove him guilty.

"He knew you wrote those letters," he threw at the cripple.

"Not he," Marsh calmly replied. "He couldn't be sure but that they came from Marian, for he did not know if she were living or dead. He dared make no move until he did know."

Ah, so Lionel Marsh reasoned it out that way. Mr. Oswald made no move for fear a nemesis, Marian, was on his trail.

"Say, do you expect sane men to swallow this tale you've spun? Nothing doing. Come across with the truth!" This was the final rally on Abe's part. Per-

haps he might frighten the cripple into a confession yet, providing his story was false.

"You can verify every word I have spoken," came the simple retort.

"No, you poisoned him. We know it. See, you said not a word about the poison of the snake that killed him. You introduced it into his museum; it bit him. You can't deny it. We know what you wrote. You told him you'd do it; remember 'Through the Jaws of the Serpent!' "

CHAPTER XV.

THE WEEPING WOMAN.

IF Sullivan thought that he could “throw a scare” into the cripple by the accusation, he was disappointed. The man smiled in a sad way and, raising his hands, linked by the irons, made a gesture with both as though brushing away an inconsequential matter.

“That is a matter easily explained,” he said. “The village of Two Rocks, where the wretch ruined me, takes its name from two large stone pinnacles which stand where a hogback runs across the country, one on each side of the creek that has cut its way through the ridge, and flows through the village. They are tall and not unlike jagged teeth. It happened one evening as Marian and I stood on the hillside looking down upon the little valley, she saw a fancied resemblance in the creek, the pillars and the valley, to the jaws of a serpent; the brook was the twisting tongue, the pillars the fangs. It did look not unlike a serpent’s jaws, too. Ever after that our meeting place was the Jaws, or the Fangs, of the Serpent; we used either term, as chance happened to bring it up.”

“Why did you write that to Oswald, then? He knew nothing of ‘The Fangs of the Serpent,’ ” Abe fired back at him.

“I had everything to win and nothing to lose. If he didn’t know what it meant, his imagination, in connec-

tion with 'M. E.' would supply it with a sinister significance. Yet, had she loved him and had they walked there, what more natural than for her to call his attention to it, too, and to use the term. Then, when he got a letter mentioning it, he would think the message came direct from her, though he could not be certain. Oh, I had him on the grid of worry. Yet if he could have spent a year for every moment of sorrow he had caused her, it would not be enough. Damn him, how can a man believe in the mercy of Heaven when such devils as he walk the earth."

Abe looked at Smyte; Smyte's face wore a puzzled look. As for me, this part of the case was done; I knew that we must look elsewhere for the murderer of J. Marion Oswald. No, no cripple, such as the poor twisted form before me, could have struggled up four flights of stairs, killed Oswald, and come down again without being seen. The murderer must, of necessity, have been in the room. But Abe wasn't going to let a chance slip through his fingers.

"Take him to the station! We'll get the truth out of him after a while," he ordered.

"Just a moment," and Marsh spoke most earnestly. "Do not be in a hurry about this. If I had killed the beast, and by any chance you had trailed me so far, I would boast of having done it. But I am not minded to die for the cur when I had nothing to do with his death. Give me five minutes, and call in those whose names I give you, and I will show you that on the day he died, and for three days before and a week after I was confined to my bed with a flare-up of this rheumatism."

He did it, too. There was nothing for Smyte and

Abe to do but to set him free, and they did. A growled apology accompanied the removal of the irons. Marsh took it all in good part.

"There is no apology necessary," he remarked as he struggled to a more upright position. "I have followed the case closely and have been expecting you. I figured that it was merely a matter of time before the letters would be found and myself located. I am sorry to have to disappoint you; it would be one of the happiest hours of my life could I stand here and tell you that I had paid my debt to that devil's spawn. As it is—well, what have I to live for? Marian is gone—love is lost; Oswald is dead—revenge is lost. Before me lie—days—days—days, empty days."

Back at the station the three officers were sent off duty and Smyte returned to his home. Sullivan and I sat down in the office. Abe was worried.

"Don't it beat hell?" he remarked, as he turned the matter over in his mind. "Here I think we have landed the man, and it's a fluke. Say, this blamed Oswald case is getting on my nerves. Can't I make a move that won't fizzle out?" and he flashed a long brown cigar from his pocket, bit off a good inch of the end, and lighted up.

"Look at it any way you want to," he went on, as the cigar glowed red under the fierce draught he put upon it, "what more do we know about the killing of Oswald than we did after the inquest? He's found dead with two holes in his wrist. By Jove," and he thumped the desk with his fist, "I'll go back to first thoughts, and bet the old fellow kicked himself off."

All that were in the room were Abe, the lieutenant in charge, and myself.

"The old man was mixed up with the mediums, too. That adds an angle that leads your friend Herron's way," and he looked at me.

I nodded as I replied.

"But I wouldn't say, Abe, that we are no farther along than a week ago. We've had some pretty fair luck of late; just hope for a little more of it and everything will clear up in a hurry. Anyway, we know a lot more about Mr. Oswald than we did before locating Lionel Marsh. And some of these things may have a bearing on his death. We know why the letters were written and can surmise why they were concealed."

"Sure," from Abe, "the old boy didn't know if the woman was alive or not; until he did, he dared make no open move."

"Yes," I assented, "no *open* move. But what concealed moves did he make? There was one that is clear to all of us."

"It is? Not to me!" Abe's eyes showed doubt. "What was it?"

"I don't see it either," added the lieutenant.

"Yet both of you clearly recognize it," I explained. "Think a moment. Wasn't it shortly after the receipt of the first of these letters that he began to manifest an interest in psychic phenomena? Probably, if we could know the exact truth, we would find that the date when he began his investigations closely coincides with his certain knowledge that the writer knew of his life with Marian Ellerson. What does he do? Gets in touch with the principal mediums in an endeavor to find out if she is alive or not. Evidently his luck was poor, and he was no better off than when he started. He doesn't know if she is in the land beyond, or is

still here; at least he has received no definite answer. Does he give up?"

"Not a man like old Oswald," put in the lieutenant.

"Right," I went on, "he does not. His life, his training, lead him to the conclusion that what he undertakes cannot fail. If others can be mediums, why not he? He tries it, apparently with success. But how much, that is the thing we have to measure."

"Say, you don't swallow that stuff about the spirit coming, do you?" Sullivan's tone was sarcastic.

"Hold on, Abe," I retorted, "I've seen her. Don't forget that."

"Well, I haven't. Also, there is a slim chance that *I* will," he added grimly.

"Recall what Miss Oswald reports of the conversations, and what I myself heard." Abe and the lieutenant exchanged glances. "There are but two reasonable hypotheses; either the spirit is genuine, or we have some one on the inside at the séances who knows a remarkable lot about J. Marion Oswald and his affairs, especially about the past."

"Who knows?" the lieutenant asked, looking at Abe.

"Don't ask me," Abe threw back. "I'm in a condition any school kid would call funk." The lieutenant shifted his glance to me. I deliberated a moment, before replying.

"At a guess, I'd say that those most likely to know something are the butler, Tasker; Oswald's personal attorney, Stitmore Tithes; and his secretary, Reacon Mars. For it must be some one who has first or second hand knowledge, and these are those who have it."

"You'll have to leave out the secretary then," Abe argued. "He is a young fellow and has been with

Oswald only five years. Unless he got hold of some documents, and it don't look as if there were many in this case. If he had, Mars would have let us in. He hasn't anything to gain by holding out on us."

"But the other two?" inquired the lieutenant.

"Well, I don't know," and Abe scratched his head. "Of course an old seravnt like the butler is bound to see some funny things happening right under his nose; he's in the house, too,—now, I wonder," and Abe looked off into vacancy for a moment. "Say, could he be bringing in the medium and posting her?"

The lieutenant and I smiled. "Never mind him. How about the third member?" I asked.

"He's a pretty big man," Abe stated, slowly, tapping the arm of his chair. "His business, besides what Oswald threw his way, is large. He has influence; he's one of the comers. Pretty well fixed, too, according to report."

"And he'll be better fixed in the near future," the lieutenant added. "He's engaged to old Oswald's daughter."

From the moves Abe made, I could see that it was news to him. He looked first at the lieutenant as though to be sure he had heard aright; then he turned, slowly, and confronted me; there was a question in his eyes I could not escape. I nodded. It was true. Isobel was mine; she loved me and was promised to me by all the vows lovers hold most dear. But—she had not yet broken her engagement to Tithes.

"H'm, is that so," remarked Sullivan very slowly and distinctly, "I wouldn't be surprised—" He did not finish. Stitmore Tithes had influence. Sullivan would make no statements, even among friends, as he

was now, that reflected in any way on as big a man as the lawyer. But in his mind suspicion was born, as for some time it had existed in my thoughts; there was the motive; was there the opportunity? could Tithes account for all of his time on the day Mr. Oswald was found dead?

Though Tithes and I both loved Isobel, or rather, I worshiped her, and she was engaged to him, we had never met. I had seen him at close hand only on the day of the inquest; the lines of our lives had not yet crossed openly.

What I knew of him and what dislike I had for him came from a reading beneath the surface when Isobel told me why she was in no hurry to break with the attorney. I tried to be honest, tried to give him the benefit of the doubt; yet among all the theories that had come to me, the one involving Stitmore Tithes was the only one that had a deep, clear-cut motive back of it. Married to Isobel, with her father out of the way, he became the uncrowned king of America. No single individual would control such vast holdings as he.

The one element against his committing the deed was that there seemed to be no need for such haste as the murder indicated. In the natural course of affairs, Mr. Oswald had but a short time to live; then why hurry him over the great divide? Unless there was something in Tithes's life that was in danger of reaching the multimillionaire's ears, and which, coming to them, would forever remove Stitmore Tithes from the list of possible husbands of Isobel? For Isobel's sake, and for his own, Larry Bowen would make every effort to find out.

Abe broke in on my reflections.

"There is also another thing to consider." He leaned over, knocked the ashes from his cigar, and as he straightened back in his chair, his eyes fastened themselves on mine. "Another party had the chance—and she had the opportunity."

"She—she—" for a moment I failed to comprehend. Then with rage boiling in my breast, I bounded from my chair. "She—don't you dare mention her name in that connection, Abe Sullivan, or I'll beat the life out of you."

Abe's glance never faltered.

"Sit down, boy," and his voice was stern, yet had in it a kindly note. The lieutenant rose and stretched himself; he was a huge man. I saw that I had no chance, physically, with these two. I subsided.

"Listen, you," and my voice trembled, "I know that Miss Oswald is as innocent as—as—as you are, Lieutenant," and I appealed to him. "I know it. I—" but I stopped.

"Larry, I'm not quite as blind as you think I am." Abe paused, reflectively. "But that aside, I am not accusing her. It is just a case of motive and opportunity. We find in all cases where murder is committed that there is always a reason in some one's mind, why it is necessary. This reason falls in one of two classes; it is committed either for personal profit or for revenge. I first thought that Oswald had killed himself; but if he didn't, then it looked most uncommonly like a case of revenge. But that as a motive seems to be slipping away. On the other hand, who profits? To-night I learn that Stitmore Tithes is one; and the other is—the daughter."

I writhed.

"Profit? How?" I flew to her defense. "She had all she wished, and in the course of time, a very few years, she'd have lost her father. He couldn't have lived much longer. Motives? She had none."

"All right," acquiesced Abe. "Of coure we look first to see who has a motive for a murder; then, among those we seek the ones that had an opportunity. In this case, possibly Tithes—certainly Miss Oswald."

"Yes," I sneered, "and the butler, and the maids, and every one else in the house. Drop it, Abe—drop it. I'm going to the office."

Yet as I ran out, hailed a taxi, and was carried away, I was much disturbed. Not as to the guilt of Isobel. No, of course she was innocent of any knowledge as to how her father died. But I worried because, if the police had it in their thick heads that she had a motive and the opportunity, it would be right in line with their methods to attempt some third degree stunt. And I would not have her harassed by a single question. The poor girl was weighed down now, under a load of worry and of fear, fear that her father would be forever branded as a self-murderer.

As soon as I reached the News office I called up the Oswald home, and, speaking to Tasker, told him to tell his mistress that I would be up to see her on a very important mission in about an hour. Then I gave myself over to the writing of the story of the raid on Lionel Marsh's rooms, and the story he had told.

Had I the power, I would have suppressed the details, but I realized that under present circumstances it would be of no avail. It would simply mean that the News would be without them when every other sheet

was running the life of Oswald as Davis in full. The task completed, I started for Isobel's home.

This was one time that I would much rather not have gone. My heart was heavy and I dreaded telling the poor girl the story Lionel Marsh unfolded. But if I did not, she would get it in all its hideous details through the press. And I, in the telling, could soften the harshness, though my Isobel must now learn that she had not been her father's only child.

Was the other daughter living? I turned the question over and over in my mind as the machine hurried me along. Sullivan had failed to press for information on this detail from Marsh. Or he might have been satisfied that the cripple had revealed all he knew. The child had been placed in a poor family which had moved away, leaving no trace. This argued that the girl was dead, for several very strong reasons. The mortality among infants is very great; second, it is especially large among babies deprived of a mother's care; and third, the infant death rate is greatest among the very poor. These three reasons, cumulative in a multiple degree, satisfied me that there were only two chances in a hundred that the child still lived. Doubtless she was dead, though no one knew positively.

But even if she were alive, the odds against her showing up in this case were still greater; about one to a thousand, I estimated. There was nothing that she could lay hold of, that I could see, that would enable her to connect her life with that of J. Marion Oswald. She had gone with people other than her mother; if she used any name it was probably theirs. Even did she know the name of her father, she would suppose it to be Davis; her mother had known no other

for the man who had tossed her aside as he was wont to toss aside the wornout wrecks he made in his plants.

I alighted from the cab at the Oswald's gate and started to walk to the doorway. I noticed, as I entered, an elderly lady on the opposite side of the street who appeared to be greatly worried. When she saw that I was looking her way, she gave one last glance at the Oswald house and hastened away. I thought no more of the matter and passed in to be met by the courtly, courteous Tasker.

This was a hard evening for me. The dear girl took it all well, but it meant that the ideals of a lifetime had been rudely shattered. Her father had always been kind and gentle with her, in so far as within him lay the power to be kind and gentle. He had been indulgent, he had made a companion of her, and now she had to hear a story such as Lionel Marsh had brought to us.

At first she flatly refused to believe a word of it; as I proceeded she came round to a heartbroken acceptance of it, only to fly again to the other extreme and, as I was leaving, admonish me that I must secure assistance and investigate every detail of the story. I never had need to; things began to swing along swiftly toward the end.

As I came down the steps from the house, I saw again the woman on the far side of the street. I thought I saw her wringing her hands, but as I moved down the walk, she started off up the street. The night was clear and the street lights closely placed, so that I could see plainly every movement she made.

As she walked away, she kept glancing back, surreptitiously. Under ordinary circumstances I should have thought little of her actions. In Chicago, the first

lesson imbibed by the Chicagoan, aye, even in the cradle, is to mind his own business. Even in my profession we do not meddle in the affairs of others unless we have a very good reason.

But there had been too many things happening about the Oswald house for me to pass by any offering, however far removed it might appear to be from a direct connection with the death of Mr. Oswald. I followed after her, but on the opposite side of the street. As she peered around and saw me traveling in the same direction as herself, she quickened her pace until she came to the first cross street, where she turned to the right; I turned to the right after her. When at her next look back she saw that I was coming in the same direction, she put on more speed, but she could not lose me. I was not long in overtaking her.

When I came up with her I saw that she was a vigorous, well-preserved woman in the sixties. She was well, even expensively, dressed; I could see that. In fact, the surprising thing was that one in such garments should be walking the streets of a winter's night, when the walks were covered with snow and a biting breeze blowing in from the lake.

Her face was drawn and her eyes were reddened. Was it from the wind, or from weeping? As I approached her more closely her lips began to tremble. She stepped aside, moderating her pace, to permit me to pass. I had no such intention.

"I beg your pardon, madam," I said, touching my cap as I fell into step beside her, "but did you not drop this down the other street a bit, just before you turned the corner," and I pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of my overcoat and handed it to her.

It was distinctively a man's, by no chance to be taken for a lady's pocket piece; also, as she had kept close watch of me by looking back, ever since I left the Oswald house, she would know that I could not by any possibility have picked up the piece of linen where I said I did. Yet she made no attempt to refuse it.

"Oh, thank you, sir." Her voice was deep and melodious and, aside from a slight tremble, firm and well-controlled. "I missed it but a few seconds ago and was looking for it, but it escaped me; my eyes are not what they once were."

The piercing gaze she bestowed on me belied that statement, nor were there marks of eyeglasses upon her nose.

"Thank you," she said again, and still further slowed her gait, expecting me to go ahead about my affairs.

"Pardon me, again, my dear madam," I returned, "but will you not permit me to call a taxi? You are tired and weary. May I not summon one?"

At once she took another tack. She bristled, and in a tone of extreme hauteur, bade me leave her at once.

"If you do not," she snapped, "I will summon a policeman."

I saw a patrolman two blocks ahead.

"Permit me, madam, I will do it for you."

Were we both bluffing? Would I have called to him? I do not know. But to her it made no difference; she dared not risk the chance that I might beckon. She wilted. I was fearful for a moment that she would collapse upon the walk.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she faltered. "Are you from the police?"

I shook my head and a yellow cab just then heaving in sight around a corner, I signaled to the driver. Luckily it was not engaged. As it drew in alongside the curb, I motioned to her to get in. She complied and as she was being seated I whispered the directions to the driver.

It was a drive of half an hour, during which she did not speak a dozen words. I had endeavored to get her to tell me why she was walking up and down before the Oswald house, only to be met with stony silence. I began to develop a chilly sensation in the region of the spine as the car drew up in front of the police headquarters.

"I thought you said you were not a policeman," she spoke reproachfully. I assisted her to alight and walked with her to the entrance.

"Nor am I, madam," I assured her, as I nodded to the lieutenant as we came in. "There have been some weird happenings in the neighborhood where I encountered you, and I had a feeling that you might assist us in explaining them."

This speech was sheer bravado. If she turned out to be wholly innocent, one Larry Bowen was in for the time of his life. I had taken big chances; how would they work out?

Sullivan had long ago gone home and I seated the lady in a chair while I called up his house. Yes, Abe was at home. Luckily it was only midnight and he was not yet in bed. His wife, who had answered the buzzer, called him to the telephone.

"Say, Abe," I began, "I was up to call upon Miss Oswald this evening and I saw a woman acting very suspiciously across the street from the house," and I

started to explain just what I had done. But Abe wouldn't let me finish.

"Tell the lieutenant to hold her there at the station, and to let no one see her," he ordered. "Get the department's nearest car and bring two of the boys with you. It's the Oswald house. I'll meet you there. Rush!" and he hung up.

CHAPTER XVI.

DEBORAH MATERIALIZES.

WHEN Abe Sullivan, listening at his end of the wire, broke in upon the tale I was telling, I was amazed. I had taken a woman to the main police station on a very slim pretext; it might have put me into serious trouble. Yet no sooner does Sullivan get the first half of the story, than he senses something that was way beyond me. I could not see why the fact that this woman was walking up and down in the street before the Oswald home, wringing her hands, should induce Abe to order a hurry-up move on the house. It could not be that Isobel was in danger, for I had left her but shortly before and had kept the woman in sight up to the time I brought her to the station.

There had been something in Abe's voice that bade me ask no questions and to make haste. The quick, incisive tones had told of some anxiety; yet there was a satisfaction ringing through them for which I could not account on the assumption that our immediate presence was desired at Isobel's residence.

I wasted no time. The woman was consigned to the matron of the station, two men were assigned to accompany me, and we went hurling out of the station in one of the department's Black Marias within five minutes of my receiving the message from Abe. The chauffeur had orders to hurry and he did, in spite of the snow and ice in the street.

As we drove up in front of the Oswald mansion, the two men and I dropped off. Abe had not yet arrived, nor was his car in sight; yet we had time for no more than a dozen breaths ere it appeared in the distance, approaching at a terrific pace. With a rush it drew up, stopped, and Sullivan tumbled out.

"Come on, boys," he cried, as he started up the walk toward the house. "The trap's sprung."

Sullivan rushed up to the front door and rang the bell. We were admitted by Tasker, whom Abe had telephoned. As we entered, he said some words to the butler I did not catch. Closing the door after we had all stepped in, the old man led us rapidly down the hall and to the rear of the house. Turning out of the main passage, he opened a door and Abe now took the lead. In a moment we began to descend; when the bottom of the stairs was reached I realized that we were in the basement of the dwelling. Sullivan halted us to give instructions.

"Get your guns, boys, and have your clubs ready. I've every reason to believe that a trap I set some time ago has sprung and that we are about to make an important capture. If it is the curari murderer, watch his every motion, and at any suspicious movement shoot; not to kill, just wing him. Now come on and keep quiet." He started on ahead, we trailing behind, the old butler last.

We passed through a large room, the laundry, I judged, through a smaller compartment, then to the right into the space set apart for the furnace. Here he stopped, and without speaking indicated a pile of packing boxes in the southeast corner. Abe now chose positions for us, sending each to a place by a wave of

the hand; and it was easy to see that every one was so fixed that they commanded the boxes. He had not switched on the light as we came in, but made his dispositions by the illumination that came in from the room we had just quitted, and by the aid of his powerful electric torch. Tasker he motioned to remain outside the door, but I and the two officers were assigned to points hidden in the gloom.

With cautious tread he approached the boxes, which lay so that the light shining through the door fell full upon them, and moved two of them slightly. This uncovered a portion of the south wall of the cellar, and I noted with some surprise that a huge bar was caught across the stones. What it was doing there puzzled me. Abe evidently knew all about it, for he reached over and lifted it, pushing the beam far back out of sight behind the boxes. He then wiggled a stone or did something else to the wall, for all of a sudden a part swung out into the room, revealing a dark hole.

Or rather, what seemed to be a part of the wall moved under his touch; in reality it was a door of boards with rock and mortar cleverly fastened to them, simulating, even to the ragged joining of the stones, the wall as it appeared. It might have been possible to detect the joints in the full light of day, but here in the cellar, though I knew where it was, I have shut the door several times since, but never have been able to see the joints.

As he threw the door open, Abe flashed his lights within. I noticed that he was very careful not to stand directly behind the torch, but leaned far over to one side. The glow of the bulb lighted up the cavity, and

we saw that it was not deep, a little over two feet square; it was empty, or so it seemed.

"Come on out of there," Abe commanded, and moved his body to a new position, though holding the torch steady. He was taking no chances of having two neat little holes drilled in his skin. No answer. He waited patiently for several minutes, then called again. Another wait. This time his patience was rewarded. Slowly a foot came into view, followed by another descending from above by iron steps driven into the stones of the wall. A black skirt followed and shortly there stepped out of the doorway into our presence a young lady, tall, and fair of face. For one in her predicament she was very self-possessed, and bowed in the direction of the light; I do not believe she could see Abe; certainly none of us was visible.

And the answer to why Abe had known, flashed through my thoughts. The woman I had apprehended was the key that unlocked the situation. He reasoned, as I now did, that she was a mother made anxious by the non-appearance of some one who had gone into the Oswald house. Not knowing of the trap, the mother could not know what had happened, and would fear the worst. Hence her vigil. And also, Abe's first intimation that his snare might hold a prisoner.

"Turn on the lights," Abe called, and Tasker, at the door, made haste to obey. As they flashed up, we arose and came forward. There was nothing to be afraid of in this girl who had just stepped out of the dark hole. She calmly looked us over, raising a hand to tuck back a stray strand of her hair. As she lifted it, we saw that it was soiled, bruised and bleeding.

Sullivan placed her in the custody of the two officers

and made a further demand on the dark opening; but no one else came out though he waited for some time. Abe then ventured to put the torch inside and turn the light upward. The place was empty. His trap had sprung and caught—just this one prisoner. Or had he thought one would be all? But surely this fine young creature could not be connected either directly or indirectly with the death of J. Marion Oswald.

She was about thirty, judging from her looks, with a firm, clean-lipped mouth. Her eyes were deep and thoughtful, and as I gazed into them I had a fleeting impression of having gazed into their depths before. She made no sign that she recognized me; even though I might think that I knew her, she did not think that she knew me; or else she was a marvelous actor.

She had spoken no word since she had stepped out of the dark cavity, yet she did not seem worried. It was rather as though we interested her, than that she was the object of our scrutiny.

Sullivan, after examining it from the basement, had entered the hole and disappeared upward. In a short time he returned, bringing with him a bunch of cloth of some kind. He left the opening and walked over to the girl.

“Young woman, I don’t know who you are, but you sure have nerve. Say, boys,” and he included us, “if this lady had had another hour or so, there would have been a neat hole through the outside wall of the chimney, and she would have made her getaway. Look at her hands. That’s how she injured them.”

Chimney? So that cavity was in the chimney; now I understood; I had as yet had not time to localize objects and so had not connected the opening with the

flues springing up on the south side of the house. But Abe was continuing.

"Yes, sir; if I'd got here an hour later I'd have found my trap empty. Did she sit down and repine when she found herself locked in? She did not. She wrenched out one of the ladder irons and with it attacked the brick on the inside. The hole she made was nearly large enough for her to get through, though it is still covered by a veneer of a single layer of bricks on the outside. As soon as she had the inside ready, all she had to do was to make sure it was night without, work a few bricks loose, slip through and drop to the ground. Then she'd have disappeared and we'd never have seen you back here again, would we, miss?"

She made no answer to Abe's question directed at her, though a slow smile curved her lips; she heard. Sullivan unrolled the cloth he had found. As he shook it out, a large black gown was revealed. With a deft twist he turned it and a white, shimmering robe was before us.

"Deborah's dress," I gasped.

"Yes, this lady is your spirit Deborah." Abe's laugh was coarse. "This is the visitant from another world that you tried to reach and that you saw floating away in a mist."

So this was our visitor. No wonder I thought I knew the face, the eyes; I had seen her that night, though dimly as through a fog. There could be no doubt that she was Deborah; otherwise what was she doing in that part of the chimney, for the opening from which she had come was but an unused flue of the great brick stack Abe had been interested in when we visited

the Oswald house after the spirit had materialized for Isobel and me that evening.

"Hold on, Abe," I exclaimed, as an idea came to me. "If she was Deborah, instead of staying inside that chimney when she found her escape by this door cut off, why didn't she use the other outlet? She could have watched her chance and easily escaped from the house."

"Say, you don't think I am quite as simple as that." Abe grinned; he was jubilant. "Of course I stopped up the other exit, too."

We had snared our prey; there was nothing more for us to do here. The entrance to the flue was closed and, escorting the prisoner, we went back to the machines and returned to the main station. Isobel we did not see. She knew nothing of the capture until next morning.

When we got to Central Station with the girl, she was taken into the woman's ward. As we entered, the woman I had brought there an hour before, rose from the chair in which she was sitting, gave a relieved sigh and with arms extended to our prisoner cried, "Oh, dearie, I'm so glad; I was so afraid something had happened."

"Mother," the girl echoed the older woman's relief, but in a different way. It was the first word we had heard her speak. Her face went white for a moment, then self-possession came back to her and she started for the older lady. But one of the policemen held her back; there should be no communication between the two until the police were ready to permit it.

"Put them in separate cells," Sullivan ordered the matron. They were led away. The lady I had picked

up had simply been held, not locked up, as Abe had not sent any such orders to me when he telephoned. Now he took me over to his office for a chat.

Sullivan was pleased with himself. Going into a closet, he presently returned with a box of long brown cigars; shortly the air was blue with smoke.

Abe explained in detail what had led up to the capture. He believed in no ghost, spirit or wraith; to him they were frauds, pure and simple. After hearing Isobel tell of the séances conducted by her father, he was sure that there was a fakir somewhere, but he couldn't be certain just where. But when Deborah had materialized for Isobel and me, he knew he had not far to look before he found the trail. In Mr. Oswald's bedroom, on his inspection, he was pretty positive that he could tell where and how the spirit entered. But when he walked around the house and saw the nearness of the chimney to the room, its size and convenience, he was dead sure that he had spotted the means used by Deborah in appearing to the Oswalds and, later, to Isobel and me.

Even though he had found out these facts, he had not caught the person or persons using this prepared trail, nor could he see any means of tracing them directly. So he decided to take a long chance and set a trap in case any one did return again.

He had said nothing to any one, save Tasker, and the latter only had a hazy idea of what Sullivan was doing. He had returned alone and made a thorough investigation of the flue and the opening in the basement. This concealed door he had found only after a long and laborious search. This I had seen, but he

explained that the hidden exit on the upper level was fully as ingenious as the lower.

The corner of the room next the chimney was used by Mr. Oswald for his wardrobe, a three-cornered affair. In this had been constructed a sliding panel. To make detection still more difficult, the wall behind, which was paneled in oak as was the rest of the sleeping chamber, had a second hidden entrance. Abe had simply fastened these two with screws, concealed a huge bar over the lower opening, so that the beam would drop down after the door had been opened and closed, locking it shut, and sat down to wait.

He was taking many a chance, yet what else could he do? If the girl had left the door open after she entered, or had she opened and closed it before entering, she would have escaped the bar, or having found it, have gone away or removed it and Abe would have secured nothing for his pains. But—luck was with him; he had made his haul.

We didn't stay in Abe's room long. I wanted to get home and catch what sleep I could before attending the preliminary examination of Deborah and her mother, which Abe said would be held next morning.

I managed to get up and get to court before the girl and the older woman were brought in. The district attorney, Cummings, was there. He had come in person to conduct the examination. There was no knowing in what direction it might turn, nor whom it might involve. In a way, the inquiry was extra-judicial, and as such not open to the public, but the case was of such importance that reporters from all papers were admitted.

The girl was the first one to be led forward. She

looked about the same as the night before, though not so bedraggled. Her air of self-assurance still clung to her; nay, it dominated her. The district attorney struck a snag immediately. She answered no questions, either as to name, or anything else; not only that, she simply refused to talk. Promises, pleas, threats; she disregarded all alike. It was exasperating. The district attorney got angry, thoroughly angry.

"Well, miss, if you will not talk now, we shall have to find a way to make you. When you face a jury on the charge of murdering J. Marion Oswald, you may be glad of a chance to speak, a chance to explain what you were doing in the place where you were caught last night."

Still she said not a word. She listened attentively to all he had to say, as though it greatly interested her, but that she was not directly concerned in the matter. I began to speculate; might there not be some big fact back of her assurance? or did she know, as I did, that Cummings was bluffing? that the police had not a single fact to connect her with the death of Mr. Oswald? The district attorney gave up and tried a new tack.

"Bring in the mother," he ordered. "Let us see if *she* will talk."

With an upright bearing the older lady entered. She was no longer the tired, worried woman of the evening before. The big man was ready for her. He began firing questions at her before she was seated.

"You are Madame Giovanetti Blatavaratsky, are you not? You are a trance medium and hold séances at nine thousand and five Elkwood Avenue?"

The woman made no reply until she had adjusted herself to the chair, and then answered, "Yes."

"In your business one name is as good as another"; sarcastically. "I do not suppose we can persuade you to tell your real one." She faced him serenely as she retorted.

"Certainly I will tell it. It is a name that I am proud to own, Mrs. Margaret O'Regan, widow of Michael."

I heard Abe give a low whistle. O'Regan! That might mean a lot of things. He bent across the table and whispered to Attorney Cummings. The latter looked at the medium with a new light in his eyes.

"Have you a daughter Anna?" he hurled at her. She was not taken aback. She answered promptly.

"I have."

"Is she a maid in the Oswald home?"

"She is."

He dropped that line for a moment.

"Your daughter here," and he indicated the silent girl with a wave of the hand, "was taken in rather peculiar circumstances."

No answer from Madame Blatavaratsky, otherwise Mrs. O'Regan. The district attorney thought to be facetious.

"Perhaps you can tell us by what right she was found in J. Marion Oswald's house at midnight, an uninvited guest, to put it mildly."

"I certainly can." Her voice rang clear and loud. "By the best right in the world. A daughter is ever privileged to enter her father's home."

The district attorney collapsed into a chair. Abe started to his feet. As for me, I was dumbfounded. The girl on the other side of the table caught her

breath and a crimson tide flooded her face. Grasping the arms of her chair, she turned full on her mother with a choking cry.

"Mother!"

"There, there, honey," the older woman soothed. "I had to tell it." To the district attorney, "To this poor child I have always been mother; she has never known any other, though she always knew I was not her real mother, but she grew up with me and always called me that. She supposes that her own name is Davis, June Davis. This I, too, thought until some two years ago; then I learned differently."

The district attorney had recovered, but he made no move to check her, nor did Abe suggest it. Police methods were working smoothly. Get somebody; make them talk. The mother was willing; and from appearances the girl, too, was no longer inclined to be uncommunicative. Here was the verbal harvest that Cummings and Sullivan longed to reap. The problem of who murdered J. Marion Oswald was about to be solved!

"A daughter had every right to enter her father's home." This one sentence changed the complexion of the whole case in their estimation. Even if the daughter had killed her father, and of that there was no proof, in view of the testimony Lionel Marsh would give, there was no jury that could be gathered in Chicago, or elsewhere, that would convict. If she had not, then was she still a daughter of J. Marion Oswald, a man of power, and that meant that gloves must be used in handling her. While the district attorney rose to his feet, and Abe lay back in his chair, his head on his chest, Mrs. O'Regan began to tell what she knew.

“Thirty years ago we were living in Belfontaine, Wisconsin, a small village. For a neighbor we had Mrs. Marian Davis, who had been deserted by her husband shortly before giving birth to a girl. Mrs. Davis was without funds and was compelled to go out to work as soon as she was able, to find support for herself and the child. She found it impossible to take the little one with her each day, and as I was always at home she formed the habit of leaving it with me. Finally she secured a fairly good position in another town, and made arrangements with me to keep the baby until she could come and get it, paying me a small sum each month. For a while she sent the money, then it stopped coming.”

I looked at June Davis and a great pity for this fine woman, beaten, borne down, with her story now being unfolded to an unsympathetic world, took possession of me. And she—was Isobel’s sister.

Mrs. O’Regan kept on with her story.

“About this time Michael was offered a good position in Chicago. I tried to reach Mrs. Davis, but could not find her. At the last place at which she had worked they told me she had been taken sick and had gone to the hospital, but they did not know which one. I tried all within a radius of twenty miles but she had been at none of these. I tried every possible means to locate her, but without avail. We moved here, bringing the child, and from that day to this, except for occasions I shall mention, I never heard a word of Mrs. Davis. I do not know if she is alive or dead.”

After having heard Lionel Marsh’s confession, several of us in the room were in a position to inform her. Had she been at liberty, she would have known, for the day’s

papers were carrying the full story, and she there would have read that Marian Ellarson Davis died in her old lover's arms some years ago.

"The years passed," Mrs. O'Regan went on. "Michael was killed at his work and I was left to shift alone. I had always been an adept at minor psychic work and gradually I drifted into the profession. I made good and developed a very extensive practice. As my children became older, I tried to break them into the game, too. Annie had no head for it; she went into service. But June was a scholar after my own heart. She is far better now than I ever was. Her mediumistic work has attracted attention from coast to coast. No one can equal her in the extent or the clarity of the messages received from the other plane. There is not a reputable investigator of psychic phenomena who does not know and has not tested her powers. All of you know of her by her mediumistic name," proclaimed Madame Blatavaratsky proudly, "Elethea Temby."

Another quirk in this case: the daughter of J. Marion Oswald was the famed Elethea Temby. Queer how things turn out. One of the greatest psychics the age has known, for over and over her work had been proven genuine, connected with a common spiritualist charlatan!

"But to hurry on with my tale." Mrs. O'Regan passed now into the present, or the recent years. "Two years ago there came to me for a séance an old man. Oh, I knew he did not want to be recognized; but I knew him at once. What did he want of a medium, he, the great millionaire financier? It was curious, what need he might have. I gave him a sitting and

pleased him, for he came back many times. Then I began to discover things.

“It is the business of mediums to gain an inkling concerning a person’s life from the few words they speak during a séance. Not only that, but our answers to their questions must be so worded that they suggest the next query to be put, which in turn is freighted with information for us.

“It wasn’t long before I found out that Mr. Oswald was desperately worried about something. By worming and twisting, I learned that there was a Marian connected with his life in a most intimate matter. That was as far as I got with the name before I tried a new direction. In this manner I found that Marian had lived at Belfontaine years ago.

“By the association of events he mentioned, I deduced the dates as but a year or two previous to the time Michael and I had left. I was morally certain now that Marian Davis was the woman he was interested in; the next time he came I brought in the name Davis, but twisted to Davies so he should not think that I recognized it. Did he bite? He swallowed the whole thing and the line of questions he asked told me the whole story. It was then that I knew I was talking to the father of my June.

“Now though I knew it, I had not one scrap of evidence to bolster up my knowledge. Nor was there a prospect of getting it while he came to my rooms. I determined to drive the séances into his own home and began, in a very indirect manner, to suggest it. The plan worked; it worked too well. He decided to drop us professionals and to go it alone. I had not counted on this but it played into our hands just the same.

If I could assist an amateur in obtaining successful séances in his own residence, why not do so? I did.

"My daughter Annie had secured a position as maid in his house. She came home to visit us every week and while she and June were out together one afternoon, I kept Annie's handbag and from her keys which were in it, made a complete set. With these it was an easy matter to enter the basement in the evening and, late at night, to explore the house. After we had taken measurements, a door was prepared and later put in place. For this I chose a time, easily found out through unsuspecting Annie, when master and daughter were away and the servants at a dance. This completed, the fixing of the steps and the upper panels was a simple matter.

"Now came the biggest task of all: to instruct June and persuade her to materialize. By letting her believe that I had promised to help out Mr. Oswald, she began to make the trips. Each night when she came back, we discussed the questions he had asked. With these and the knowledge I had already acquired, questions were prepared for June to suggest in her answers the next time she went, as well as the answers to give. That plan of suggesting the question the sitter is to ask, is the basis of our trade.

"What I was trying to do was to suggest to J. Marion Oswald the idea that his daughter was still alive, and that he must search her out and provide for her. If he should refuse to do this, I hoped to discover if there were documents extant which would prove the connection between Marian Davis and J. Marion Oswald. If there were such I needed to find what they

were and where concealed. Could I secure these, my June would have to be considered.

"Then chance stepped in just when we were progressing finely; Mr. Oswald was killed. I persuaded June to make several more trips, on one of which she materialized for Miss Oswald and a man. She spent most of her time searching for the documents that would prove her right to the name Oswald. Though she did not know it, I told her that Mr. Oswald had some valuable papers of mine when he died, involving the name of Davis. It was these she tried to find."

She ceased talking. For a moment I did not realize that the tale was done. There seemed to be so much more that should be told. The narrative had flowed on calmly, the district attorney evidently taking the view that he had better take what she had to tell now, and then use it later. But now that she was done he leaped to his feet and in sharp tones sought to lay bare the false position she had taken.

"Ah, after money were you? You admit it? Black-mail?" As he hurled the final word, Mrs. O'Regan sat erect in her chair and with anger in her eye faced her accuser. No prisoner was she now, but an insulted mother.

"Look at me." Her face was white and her voice vibrant with suppressed indignation. "Look at me and say that! Here am I, an old woman, with but few years before me, and you accuse me of *that*!" Her voice sank to deeper and deeper tones in the righteousness of her wrath. "No!" It was explosive. "It is justice I demand. Justice! That June may have her rights. She is J. Marion Oswald's older daughter, a year the

senior of Isobel Oswald. Justice! June's rights! I mean to see that she gets them."

Abe had listened with the greatest care to the story Mrs. O'Regan had placed before us. Now he took a hand. He suggested a question to the attorney.

"Why did you have this girl always open her replies to Mr. Oswald's queries with the plea, 'Do not forget, Marion; before it is too late, repent.'?"

"It was spoken in hopes of stirring his memory and getting him to right the great wrong he had committed. But you haven't quoted it correctly. What June always said was, 'Do not forget Marian; before it is too late, repent.' True, his name happened to be Marion, but she was not addressing him, but was recalling the woman he had known long ago."

Just then June Davis, or Oswald, rose and with a deep smile, addressed the district attorney.

"Pardon me, sir, but I wish to make a statement. Mother has tried to assume all the blame and to make everything out for herself in the worst possible light. Sir, do you think for a moment that I was not fully aware of what I was doing? I, too, reasoned from the replies; but before that, my first look upon the face of him who was my father told me that I was his child. Disregard my hair, and my garments, and you will see that my features reproduce each for each those of—my father."

She paused. Every head in the room save Mrs. O'Regan's was turned in her direction. Artists' pencils leaped. Shortly there would appear on the streets, papers with a photograph of Mr. Oswald and by it a drawing of June Davis, showing her face as the exact counterpart of that of her parent.

For a breath she remained silent, then went on.

"After his death I continued the work actuated by the same purpose that drove me before. I was not working for money, or my rights,—no, not that, mother," she turned to the elder woman. "It was to find the record of mother's marriage to him. For though it was polygamous, I am certain that there was a ceremony."

An attendant came in and tapped Abe on the shoulder, and he left the room. As Miss Davis, or Oswald, was testifying there came to me again that suggestion of autumn woods and their odors. I leaned over to Attorney Cummings and requested him to ask Miss June if she were addicted to the use of a special perfume. Her mother answered the officer's question, as he asked it.

"She is. I have warned her against it; it is not safe in our work, but she persists that a tiny bit does no harm but rather stimulates the sensory imagination of a sitter."

It all came back to me, the odor at the funeral, on that evening in the street as I was entering the News office, and the odd thoughts that came to me on the night Isobel and I had the private séance. Each time it had been due to the presence of this girl. By premeditation at the house, by accident on the street; at the funeral. What more natural than for her to attend the last rites of the man to whom she owed her being. And the eyes I thought I knew! As I had looked into the face of June Davis as Deborah, I saw not only her father's features. Again there rose before me the eyes of J. Marion Oswald as I had lifted their lids and

gazed into them. It was clear, now; June Davis had her father's eyes.

Though the confession we had just heard explained the appearances and disappearances of Deborah, it did not solve the mystery of J. Marion Oswald's death. Mrs. O'Regan and June had many questions to answer before they were cleared of complicity. Cummings seemed to believe they were involved, and was straightening himself preparatory to beginning a verbal bombardment of their stories, when Sullivan burst into the room. He hastened to the attorney's side, said something in a low voice, and a look of amazement overspread that official's face.

"We must adjourn this examination," he stated sternly; "new trouble has developed at the Oswald home."

CHAPTER XVII.

STITMORE TITHES FINDS THE CURARI.

THE information given by the district attorney shocked me into violent activity. "More trouble at the Oswald home" could mean but one thing,—Isobel. God, what could have happened to her? Did the threat we had heard from Deborah, June Davis, mean something after all? Was the warning "Consider thy father; as he is now, so shall you be; consider, repent," a means of telling Isobel that her enemies were planning her death by the same means they used on her father? Oh, could we have gone farther in the inquiry and asked some of the many questions that were necessary,—but there was no time now.

Oh, Isobel, Isobel! if anything has happened to you——! No sooner had Cummings heard what Sullivan had to say, and then given voice to his startling news, than I rushed for Abe. More information was what I wanted; more. Was Isobel——

Abe didn't know; the officer who had answered the phone told him that it was a woman's voice; she had but stated that there was another mysterious death in the Oswald house and to send the police immediately.

My fear made me nearly frantic. I wanted to start at once, to run, ride, any way to get there; but I must be going. Abe sensed my troubles and taking me by the arm, restrained my mad impulses.

"Just keep calm and collected. Don't do anything foolish. Everything's all right. We'll be leaving directly. Come with us."

The district attorney had hurriedly closed the inquiry and sent the two mediums back to the matron. Here was an opportunity to be seized to get into this mystery at first hand. Racing out into the corridor, we struggled into our coats as we went. A huge car stood panting at the door. Into this Abe leaped; I was at his heels, and the district attorney with two officers followed.

Even in the stress of my fear I could notice the other news-writers and sympathize with them. Men from every sheet had been at the inquiry and they were now scurrying about trying to secure cars to carry them to the house. It was not an affair that permitted of an excuse for their failing to get in on the story. They *must* get there. My close acquaintance with the case gave me the inside track. I was of use to the officers and they were playing the game fair; my assistance to them brought their aid to me.

As the last policeman closed the door, the car gave a shiver and a snort; with a lurch it was hurled into high and bounded away down the avenue. Around corners it whirled, on two wheels or one; on the straight-away it seemed to lift above the ground so rapid was the pace. I scarce heeded it. What was the matter at the house? Isobel! I dared not think of all that might have happened; even at a hint I grew sick, quivering, shaking, nauseated.

The car sped on. No voice was raised. The very speed checked utterance. Yet if the others felt one tithe the agitation that swayed me, they could not have

uttered a word had they tried. What a trip that was: already it seemed days since we had started; until we arrived, months. Yet my watch showed it had taken but a very few minutes. Abe called it a quick trip.

The car stopped. We piled out, helter skelter, not standing on ceremony, and ran up the walk with more speed than dignity. Sullivan and I were in the lead. I have many years the better of the detective, and at his time of life years tell, yet I was not far ahead of him when we dashed up the steps. The district attorney was in the rear. Even haste could not wholly conquer his pride.

The door opened to our advance; they were watching for our coming. Tasker with his habitual reserve stood at one side, but his face was worn and haggard; his dark, wrinkled skin showed pale under the stress of his emotions.

I needed to ask him no questions; as I hurried across the threshold and started down the hall, I caught sight of a tall, slender figure. In the sense of relief that swept over me, I grew faint and nearly collapsed. But the figure saw me, too, and in a moment the dear girl was in my arms, sobbing and holding me close as I strained her to my breast.

"Larry, oh Larry, dear! You've come, you've come."

I comforted the poor girl as best I could; for the sight of her had eased my anguished fear. I soothed her as my heart bade me, for she was nearly hysterical with terror, and some other strong emotion swayed her.

I led her into the library and together we sank down on a couch. I tried, but could get no information from her. Sullivan had stopped to quiz Tasker and,

his statement obtained, had gone on up the stairs. The two officers followed him. Just then the maid, Elsinore Trevecott, appeared to attend her mistress. From her I gained the facts I had not obtained from Isobel.

"Oh, Mr. Bowen, it is terrible, terrible," and her quiet voice was hoarse with feeling. "It is Mr. Stitmore Tithes. Tasker found him dead in the doorway of the museum."

Stitmore Tithes? Stitmore Tithes *dead*? I could not comprehend. But when I did there came a surge of feeling I could not suppress; joy welled up in my throat. I should have been ashamed, been sorry; but—I was not; I was glad—glad! Isobel was free! In an excess of emotion I forgot the maid and drew her close.

The district attorney now came in, led by Tasker, and I told him what Elsinore Trevecott had told me.

"We'll go up," I added.

"No, no, Larry," and Isobel sobbed on my shoulder. "Stay with me. Oh, promise me you'll never go near that horrible room again. Swear you'll never touch a thing in the museum. Larry, Larry, you are all I have left; please, dear, don't leave me."

Cummings looked as though he wished to ask a question but refrained. He nodded at me to remain and followed Sullivan up the stairway. One of the officers went on guard at the front door; the other had already gone up.

I gave my attention to quieting Isobel. She was driven nearly out of her mind. And no wonder; first her father, and now Stitmore Tithes, her affianced husband in a sense. Though she had not loved him, the very fact that he had gone to his death in the same

room as her father, was a shock under which only the strongest women could have stood up.

For all that I knew Tithes might have died a natural death; though there would have been small reason to call in the police were that the case. The maid, Elsinore, gave me what she knew in a little more detail as she busied herself about the room doing little things for Isobel.

“Tasker went up the stairs just before eleven o’clock, and he caught sight of Mr. Tithes all in a heap on the top landing. Tasker went no farther, but hurried down as best he was able and told me. I telephoned right away to the police, where Mr. Sullivan might be, asking him to come. If he came at once, might not he solve the question? Then Miss Isobel heard of it and I must try and get you; but I couldn’t.”

No, for of course I was at the court. As she rambled on I learned that no one had dared go near him; they were waiting until the police came. Deltour, the chauffeur, was placed on guard on the stairs just below the body, to see that it was not moved or touched until the officers had arrived.

I did not get the information concerning what was found at this first inspection from first hand. I stayed with Isobel, yet Abe told it to me that afternoon as we were going back down town; I can, therefore, speak of matters about as they developed.

The body of Stitmore Tithes lay in the little hall at the head of the stairs, on the museum floor. Abe said that when he first saw him, judging from the position in which the body lay, he thought he had fallen forward; his head was at the top step and his feet in the doorway; there were strong indications that he

had not pitched forward violently, but had gently collapsed; his arms were doubled under him.

His face was calm and peaceful; in fact, serene and happy looking. District Attorney Cummings, who knew him well, said that all the harshness, all the savage, relentless lines, and the tenacity of the bulldog chin, were smoothed away. He lay at rest and at peace.

"What's the matter?" asked Cummings, when he came up, as Sullivan was finishing his examination, "heart failure?"

In reply, Sullivan lifted a limp arm and turned the wrist so that the inside met the eyes of the official. The district attorney whistled. There, in the firm, white flesh, were two tiny punctures. One was at almost the center of the wrist, the other at one side, nearly missing the arm entirely. It barely entered the muscle. Its course could be traced by a curved red line just beneath the skin, showing distinctly through the transparent membrane. It was curved along its full length! Like the mark made by a serpent's fang!

"I sent for Dr. Templeton," Sullivan told Cummings. The surgeon had not been at the station when we left. The district attorney nodded his approval. "But I know what those marks are," Abe continued; "Templeton will confirm my statement. The same implement that got old Oswald made these holes. It is another death from poison. Stitmore Tithes appears to have solved the mystery that baffles us. He has found the curari."

"Where's the weapon?" Cummings asked.

"Don't know," Abe replied. "It isn't around him. It may be somewhere near, but we haven't begun a search. I'm just going through his clothes."

The search was close, minute ; the customary articles, a purse with a small sum, a watch, a fountain pen, a few other odds and ends and a large sealed envelope were taken from his pockets and spread out for the district attorney to study. But not an article that shed any light on this murder.

The last thing Sullivan found was a small packet of letters tucked away in a pocket inside 'Tithes' shirt. On these being examined, they were found to be letters from a mistress of the dead attorney, whom he was maintaining in South Chicago. But they offered not one beam of light which might pierce the fog of this man's death.

These letters had all been opened, but there was another find that was sealed. Cummings took the long envelope into his hands, and stood regarding it as though in a quandary. As a question of legal right, doubtless it should have been carried sealed into court and opened only on the judge's order.

But this was an extraordinary occasion. Within this folded and gummed paper might lie a fact that would point to the murderer. He decided to take the responsibility of investigating the contents. Pushing a pencil beneath the flap, he rolled it toward the center and shortly bent this back, removing the folded paper he found inside. This was on a printed form and had an official look. The district attorney unfolded it, gave one glance and turning his head in Abe's direction informed him that it had nothing to do with 'Tithes' death. But he continued reading it with the closest attention for some time ; and after refolding it and placing it in his pocket, he no longer gave his whole thought to the consideration of the latest happening

in the case; instead, he carried with him an air of preoccupation.

The first thing Abe did after assuring himself that Tithes was dead, was to make a hurried search of the museum, on the chance that the murderer might be hiding there; and now, with Cummings at his side, he looked more closely.

Yet nothing that showed a murderer had ever been present was discovered. The arrangement of the room was too open to permit of his concealment. Abe found every window fastened on the inside. Whoever committed the crime had escaped down the stairway and taken the weapon with him; no other avenue to safety lay open.

One circumstance worked against the police. The museum had been kept sealed for some weeks after the inquest on Mr. Oswald's death, but after that time it was felt that every possibility of the room had been exhausted, and it was turned over to the care of the house servants. Consequently it was swept and dusted every day. Had the police kept it locked, there would now have been a layer of fine particles that might have told the full story. Yet, had it remained closed, Dr. Herron and I would have been barred and the letters to Mr. Oswald would still be hidden.

Dr. Templeton, on his arrival, confirmed Abe's diagnosis; death had resulted from curari administered through the wrist. Tithes had been dead about an hour and a half, he affirmed. This meant that the attorney had been killed only about fifteen minutes when found, for we were on the scene within thirty minutes of the call.

What had led Tithes to make the trip to the museum?

What was he after? Had he entered the room, or had he been struck down as soon as he reached the fourth floor? And where was the weapon?

This last question was propounded to Sullivan by the district attorney.

"I don't believe it is here," Abe replied. "It went down with the murderer, and when we get him, we'll have the tool with the two points. It certainly isn't in any easily found place in this museum. There remains one possible chance; it may be under the body."

They returned to the form of Tithes and the attorney asked,

"Has the coroner been notified?"

Sullivan assured him that such was the case.

"Then lift him up. He must be moved anyway. Take him to the lower floor."

Abe and the patrolman lifted the form, carefully watching to see that no implement lay beneath; the body concealed nothing.

"I suppose it is up to me to make the same old search," Sullivan remarked to Cummings as they were returning to the upper floor. "I've been over it several times and so has Larry and Dr. Herron, and all we got were those letters, and they had no connection with the killing."

Marsh's story had dissociated his communications from connection with the death of Mr. Oswald. This left but two known suspects, Tithes himself, whom Abe had been quietly investigating, and Deborah.

"Let me tell you, whoever did these two to death is a slick one." They were back in the museum searching for new light. "He comes up, sticks the curari into Oswald, and escapes without leaving a trace. Now

Tithes gets the same dose; again the murderer calmly walks off."

Cummings and Dr. Templeton listened attentively. Abe was reasoning aloud, and so far had voiced only undisputed facts. The detective went on.

"Tithes has just been killed. The same weapon is used; don't forget that. I measured the holes in Oswald's wrist; just an inch and a half apart. The distance between the punctures in Tithes' arm is the same, one and one-half inches. Tithes was suspected of having had a hand in the killing of Oswald; he had a motive and might have had an opportunity; maybe he did do it. And this might be suicide. But if so, where is the weapon? How could he dispose of it before death overtook him, so that we can't find it. No, I don't think it can be suicide. Another thing; he hasn't been dead long."

There was no escaping this latter fact. The members of the little group might disagree over the possibility of suicide, but Stitmore Tithes had not been dead over two hours. With this in mind, Abe enforced the other objection.

"Those mediums are also under suspicion of being concerned in the death of Oswald. The old lady tells a good story, but I'm not yet convinced that they did not have a guilty knowledge concerning the murder. But we had them under cover last night and this morning. Just as certainly they could not have been in court this morning answering questions and still be here killing Tithes. A medium may be a peach at her business, but I never yet heard of one that claimed to be able, physically, to be in two places at the same time. If they had nothing to do with this death, and

they couldn't have, then the chances are greatly increased that they had nothing to do with the other, either."

"Might not the girl have prepared the engine of death?" asked the district attorney. "Remember, she spent some hours of last night in this building and also, probably all day yesterday and the night before that. That was what worried her mother, and brought her out. The girl had plenty of time."

"But if she got out of the trap to do it, what'd she get back in for? But forget that. Suppose she did, where's the machine?" Abe knew he had asked a poser. "Show me; that is all I ask." He shrugged his shoulders.

"How about this then?" and Cummings looked fixedly at Abe. "The girl was found in a flue in the chimney?"

Abe nodded.

"May not that same opening extend to this floor? There—"

Sullivan gave a start and without waiting for the district attorney to finish, started for the south wall of the museum.

"Lord, yes," he threw back over his shoulder, "how'd I come to miss that bet?"

He found the inside surfaces smooth and unbroken, nor was there any evidence, internally, that the chimney lay just beyond. Its exact position was determined by an inspection through a window, opened for the purpose, which gave the location of the flue. An examination made of every square inch of this area and adjoining sections revealed no evidence that the walls had ever been disturbed.

"I'm going down to the basement," Abe told the other two. "You remain here. If I work up this high, I'll rap if I fail to find an opening." He started down, stopping on the way for me. Isobel was feeling much relieved, but still she did not want me to go. Sullivan insisted; the two officers were busy and he needed someone with him on whom he could depend.

As we went down the hall I heard my brothers of the pen at the front door. They were trying to gain a knowledge of what was going on from the officer and from Tasker. Abe must have left orders to keep them out, for they did not get in, though I know that, later, he gave them what facts he had.

We found the door and bar to the chimney just as we had left them. I tried to make out the entrance but failed to see it until Sullivan swung it out. He flashed his torch inside, then upward; nothing. He entered and began the climb.

In a few seconds I heard him calling. The steps had reached the first floor and there ceased. How could anyone get any higher? By a rope possibly, but there was nothing above that it could be fastened to, he said.

"Larry," he remarked as he descended and stepped out of the stack, "no one ever got higher than that first floor. The murderer never got to the museum through this entrance."

We ascended to the museum floor. As we reached the room Dr. Templeton was discoursing on the effects of the curari.

"No," he was saying, evidently in reply to some question of Cummings, "I cannot grant that; Mr. Oswald might have died where struck, or he might have

taken a few steps. Stitmore Tithes was a much younger and somewhat more active man. He was but little over forty-five years old, as I happen to know. Should the amount of curari injected have been precisely the same for him as for Oswald, he might have lived long enough to walk some distance, say fifteen or twenty steps, before the paralysis became absolute."

Sullivan reported to the attorney. There was some discussion, which brought up the letters Herron had found in the chest. I told how they had been concealed; Abe and I turned it bottom up and I demonstrated how the compartment opened. They asked many questions. We reversed the case.

I explained Dr. Herron's hypothesis, that the box was an old treasure-chest, and had a weapon concealed in the lid, the idea we had been compelled to abandon.

"You'll notice when I open it, that the top is too thin to conceal any such complicated mechanism," and I operated the catch two or three times to show how it worked. They peered into the interior and with their fingers, calipered the upper part and the sides as well. Abe stood by in a dejected mood. Things which had promised so well, were getting beyond him. Here we were, after months of investigation, back at the beginning with another murder on our hands.

"That chest? There's nothing in that idea," Abe snarled, as he leaned against a neighboring case, with head hunched between his shoulders. "But if I had an ax I'd knock the old thing to pieces; I'd go for that partition, I'd rip it out; I'd smash every object in this room, and then you'd all agree with what I know to be a fact, that the weapon with two points is not within these walls. But," and he sighed deeply, shaking his

head, "I can't do it. Things too old and valuable. Not to be injured."

Shortly after this he began to post the men who had come with him and the two who had accompanied the coroner; they were given positions about the house and one was placed in the museum. I ran down to bid Isobel good-bye. She was still in a nervous state.

I tried to persuade her to go to some friend's home for a few days. She half consented, then said she simply could not. I promised to spend as much time as I could for the next few days in her company.

Abe and I walked away together. Where before he had been brusque and hurried, now he took a slow, deliberate gait.

"Larry," he remarked after we had gone several blocks, "do you recognize one very peculiar circumstance connected with both these cases?"

"Yes," I replied, "not one, but several. What one in particular, struck you?"

"Do you realize that neither victim made any struggle or any outcry when attacked?"

"That's so," I acquiesced, after considering for a moment.

"That means one of two things. The blow was delivered so quickly, so unexpectedly, that they had not time to make an effort to defend themselves; or——"

"Yes, yes," I insisted, as he paused, "what is the other alternative?"

He looked at me pityingly and puckered his brows as though undecided. Then he spoke.

"It means—that the one striking the blow was well known, was well-beloved of them both."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FIND.

SOMEONE near and dear to them!" I could not pretend to misunderstand. Abe's meaning was as plain as if he spoke her name. But to believe it—never, never! It was not true!

After hungering down the years for a love like mine and at last finding my soul's Golconda, only to have Abe hint that it could not last, that I must lose it. It was unbearable.

Never, never! Isobel was mine, I was hers. I knew her better than anyone; I had fathomed the depths of her love and through that love had been revealed to me the wonders of her woman's soul. She commit such a crime? Impossible? It were farcical even to hint at it. Isobel Oswald, and I knew it even as I knew I myself was not guilty, was untarnished even in thought of such a thing. Whoever did the deed it was not she.

Oh, if Abe could only reason? If he began to watch her—well, I must dig down to the very roots of this thing and find the guilty man. And who was he? He must be some unknown who slipped in and out, doing the deed in a manner prepared. Perhaps it had just chanced that both were found on the museum floor, Tithes on the landing, Mr. Oswald near the tapestry.

I took my stuff down to the office that afternoon and did not go down that night. From now on I felt that

I had enough to do, following the case as it unfolded, and digging away at the facts. There was much that I could do, for I had been on the inside from the very beginning.

When the papers came out, the News was almost the only sheet that had a good word to say for the police department. Here was a tremendous situation from the news and editorial standpoints. A very wealthy man is killed; months pass, his murderer is still at large, the mystery of his death unsolved. Then in the same house, in the same room, in a manner identical with the first, a second death occurs. What, wailed the press, is the use of keeping thousands of men in a department and spending millions on them, when they not only fail to solve the first mystery, but a second crime is committed right under their noses.

I passed a bad night. The thought of Isobel, and the seed of distrust Abe had planted, kept me tossing about for hours. She *couldn't* be guilty; it was unthinkable even to consider her in connection with such a crime. How I yearned to have her in my arms; to hear her dear voice with its melody of tenderness, telling the love that watered my thirsty heart. Question her about the deaths, hint—never, nor should Abe; not for a moment would I think it.

I rolled and writhed, and fretted and fumed, for I could not sleep. Again and again I went over all that we knew about the case; and the more I considered it, the more I reached a certain conclusion; the secret of those deaths was to be found on the fourth floor of that house. As I dropped into a doze just before morning, I decided that I would go back there again and search

and search through the museum, never giving up until I found that secret.

Early next morning I got in touch with Sullivan. His voice, as it came over the wire, was surcharged with woe.

"Seen the papers this morning?" he groaned. "Notice the nice things—*not*—they are saying about us? Fierce, I'll say it is. But the papers aren't so bad; the Chief had me in for a talk. Yea—he did the talking. I've got to get somebody in this case, and blamed quick, too. You want to volunteer? To save my face I may have to frame you."

"Why not let me help? I've been figuring on a new angle in the problem, and I've come to a conclusion," and I explained what I thought, and what I wanted to do.

"Go ahead, go ahead," his voice came heartily over the wire. "Wish I could work with you, but I can't just now. I'll send down word to the boys to give you every assistance. You'll have the run of the museum and any other part of the house without any interference from them. Oh, lordy, lordy, in my present position I'm grasping at every straw. Are you a straw? Well, draw on your luck and tumble into something that will help us out. We're going on with the examination of the mediums this morning and I've got to be there. So long."

Sullivan hung up.

I went down to the Oswald home, reaching there at nine-thirty. Tasker admitted me and took me in to Isobel. I spent some time discussing the situation with her. But I did not tell her of my contemplated plans. I judged it better not to do so.

When I finally reached the fourth floor, the officer stationed there had received his orders. He admitted me without question. As I entered he remarked that I was quite as good a guard as he and that he would run out for lunch.

What I intended to do, I hardly knew. Should I ransack the whole place or should I search for a secret passage? I was inclined to the latter, for, taking it all in all, there was only one hypothesis left that would fit the case.

The weapon that killed both Mr. Oswald and Stittmore Tithes had not been found in the museum; if it were not there, it must have been carried away. Carried by what means? Human probably. In what manner? Certainly not down the stairway; that was unthinkable. The only other mode of egress from the fourth story was the windows; they were all locked on the inside; therefore, a secret passage was the only explanation of the means whereby the murderous tool could have left that floor.

What, I said to myself, are you already crawfishing from your determination of last night? It certainly looked like it. Anyway the atmosphere of the place was depressing. But no, I'd still hold to the belief that the secret of the deaths would be found here in the museum.

I decided that the first thing I'd do would be thoroughly to examine every wall and every window, then the ceiling and lastly the floor. But I had little more than begun when Elsinore came up to call me. Isobel wanted to see me in her morning-room. I forgot that I was to remain on guard, and went down with the maid.

"Oh, Larry," she cried as I entered, "why will you go to that horrible room? I am so afraid something will happen to you. Oh, why cannot someone discover what hangs over this house? It is so terrible!" I sat down beside her.

"But, dear," I reasoned with her, "unless I do go there and study the situation, how am I going to find out what it is that has cast this mantle of mystery over your home? There is a cause for it, and we are going to find it, too. We surely will; look what a lot of things we have cleared up, even Deborah."

"And that is terrible, too." The dear girl was greatly perturbed. She had heard of June Davis's capture in the flue in the basement, and of the robe, so she knew that June had impersonated Deborah. "Just to think that father and I were so gullible. It was as real as could be; why, I can hardly believe even now that she did not get her information from the other world. How could she know so many things, things we had forgotten, things we never knew?"

The fact that the whole world, through the accounts being run in the press, knew how cleverly they had been taken in, would make her still more sensitive when it came to her knowledge. For the death of Tithes and the consequent excitement had crowded the story off the front page, and I doubted if Isobel had seen a paper at all. But when she did, and learned that Deborah—June Davis—was her sister——?

Was it the sturdy strength of will inherited from her father that made her so strong in her hour of trouble? Or had her father's age accustomed her subconsciously to the idea of his death at any moment, so that his death while sudden, could be borne? Tithes? She

had never loved him; it had been an engagement of convenience and his untimely end had shocked, but not greatly affected her.

"But what I wanted to see you about," she explained, "is this: Father's secretary, Mars, has been searching the files of correspondence hoping that a trace of the poison may be uncovered. He just telephoned that there is a letter that may throw some light on it; he asked if he should bring it down or not, or would I send someone for it. Don't you think we should secure it? It may be worthless; so much we have found has proved so; and then it may be of great value. Will you run up and get it?"

Certainly I would go; there was a chance that it might give us the key. And when the murderer was found wouldn't I lay into Abe for daring to hint—even hint—that "one well known and beloved by both" Mr. Oswald and Stitmore Tithes, might be guilty. I was in a fever of impatience to get facts that would show Sullivan that I had something besides faith to back up my belief in her innocence.

"Deltour can take you," and she rang for Tasker, when he came instructing him to have the car sent round at once. "One thing more, Larry. This very afternoon I am issuing an offer of a reward, and it will be large enough to bring information from anyone who has it. No matter what the cost, up to the very last cent I possess or may hope to possess, all shall go if necessary in the bringing to justice of him who killed my father and Mr. Tithes."

How I wished Abe might have heard her! What could he have said at an offer of her fortune to find the murderer? Where now would be "a motive"? She

could not possibly have had one. And then, how preposterous to think of a guilty person offering a vast amount to convict—herself! What utter nonsense was Abe's vague theorizing in regard to Isobel.

The officer on guard returned from lunch just then and I was free to attend to the commission.

"Oh, Larry, Larry, please be careful of yourself," and she clung to me as she kissed me good-by. "And please do not go near that hideous room again. I just know that any one there is in danger every moment. Father would have those terrible weapons and everything."

A great wave of happiness flooded my soul; to think that she cared for me—cared like that, that her love put my safety first in her thoughts. Oh, those long, long, lonely, unloved years of mine! But they were worth all the heartaches when they brought such joys as this!

The car was at the door; I jumped in, and we were away. I settled back on the cushions in a rosy dream, which slowly, imperceptibly dissolved into a consideration of the case. We sped rapidly toward the city and it was not until we were over half way that a peculiar thought popped into my mind.

Why had Isobel thought it so necessary to send some one after the letter? Mars would have come had she suggested it. But why was she sending me? Why would not Henry, here, have done as well? Was it because she wanted me out of the museum? that she feared something there? But no—no; foolish fancies of mine, the reaction, perhaps, from my intense happiness. How dare I doubt, even for a moment, the dear girl with the feel of her arms still about my neck!

As I stepped out at the curb and hastened up the steps, I was filled with a great hope: If the secretary really had found some hint! He was expecting me as Isobel had sent word by phone, and placed a chair for me beside the great table in the center of the room. I declared that I would not remove my overcoat as I'd be there too short a time. What had he found?

He turned to his desk, picked up a letter lying there, and placed it before me.

"Read it," he said.

The letter was plainly addressed to Mr. Oswald; it bore a date nearly two years previous; the letter-head was that of an inn in Cuzco; presumably the letter had been written and mailed from there, though the envelope had not been preserved. The subject matter of the communication treated of objects collected in Bolivia and Peru.

There were but two sheets, both in the handwriting of some agent of Mr. Oswald; turning to the second page, I noted the boldly written "James Orth." I looked up at the secretary standing by the opposite side of the table.

"This James Orth," I inquired, referring to the signature.

"Has been Mr. Oswald's agent in western South America for the last ten years," he concluded my unfinished question. I resumed the reading.

The first part dwelt largely with this agent's movements, the costs of travel, and odd items of information, followed by descriptions of the articles he had secured. There was nothing sensational in these descriptions of Inca and pre-Inca relics and specimens. But when I reached the last page I understood

why Mars deemed it of moment. After again referring to a trip along the Urabamba River, mentioned in the story of his movements, Orth continued.

“On this trip I had gathered the fine articles just described, when an Indian came into camp one night and offered to sell a large box. From his description I doubted its value, but on his insistence I visited his humble home. I found the box a real treasure and bought it. When I attempted to get its history, the seller was very reticent; but after patient questioning, I found that he feared to tell me, thinking that if I knew all its history I might turn it back to him. When fully assured that I retained my purchases, he gave me this information.

“‘Señor,’ he told me confidentially, ‘the chest is one great evil. Not for the Big Fish (referring to the wealth buried, according to legend, by the Incas to keep it out of Spanish hands) will I have it again in my house.’

“He, Jesus Quintanilla, on a hunting expedition in the mountains near Urabamba village, chanced upon a cavern. In it was this chest surrounded by many bones. One skeleton on a raised platform to one side of the cavern seemed to have been a person of importance. I have since visited the place and as the bones were little disturbed can state more definitely their disposition.

“The bony framework on the shelf undoubtedly was of some one high in Inca service. From the skull its owner was an Indian. About the place where the box had stood, I counted seven skulls, and enough other bones to make seven complete skeletons. In the rear of the cave was an eighth; the owner of these bones had

been a white man. Of the seven, some at least appeared to have been modern Indians, fragments of their garments being found with their bones.

"Quintanilla took the box home. He had opened it in the cavern and found it empty; but to him, the chest itself had a value that was considerable. He had it about home for two or three weeks, many of his neighbors coming in to inspect it. Then, one afternoon, when he went into the shed where it stood, he found his eldest daughter lying dead. They buried her. Three months later, on getting up one morning, a stranger was discovered stretched out just outside the door of the room that held the box. He, too, was dead. It was a full year later that Quintanilla sent his wife into this room for some beer; he heard her scream and when he reached her she lay between the chest and the beer cask; she was dying. Within the next three years two more persons were found dead in that room.

"Granted the truth of the story, it is rather odd that so many should have died near this box. But the connection Quintanilla implied existed between it and the deaths is probably non-existent. The chest is a unique specimen. If of Inca workmanship, it is entirely different from any I have seen. You will appreciate this when you examine it."

After describing a few more articles, the letter closed. As I finished, I looked up at the secretary. He was deeply interested in whatever opinion I might voice.

"A most interesting description, and history," I told him, "but I am sure that Mr. Orth was right in his judgment of the chest. A friend of mine, Dr. Cyrus Herron, held much the same views. We investigated,

sounded and probed the box and found only a packet of letters addressed to Mr. Oswald, which he himself had concealed in a secret cavity he had made."

The secretary's face fell. He extended his hand, but I shook my head.

"With your permission, I'll take this with me. Miss Oswald will want to see it."

It was agreeable to him, he replied. I returned to Isobel. I found her in the depths of melancholia; I tried to report on the letter, but her tears could not be checked long enough for me to tell of it. She needed comforting and I spent the rest of the afternoon in soothing her. Dinner we had served in her room.

After the meal I persuaded her to lie down and when she had done so, I again climbed to the museum. I told the officer on guard to go out and get something to eat; I'd watch until he returned.

When he left, I frankly confess, a chill settled in the region of my spine. And the more I stood and looked at this old chest, the more intense the chill became.

Yet within fifteen minutes of my entrance to the room, I was standing with a sheaf of written documents in my hands. They were in Spanish, as I recognized, but unfortunately I am not familiar with that language. Before I could rightly judge of their value, I must secure a translation.

There are night schools in Chicago where Spanish is taught and when the man on guard returned I was soon on my way to one of these. I said nothing to any one about my discovery; it, too, might be another false alarm.

At the school, when I told them that I wished a Spanish document translated, they requested me to

leave it. This I refused to do. These sheets might in truth be of no importance, as far as discovering who killed Mr. Oswald and Tithes, but until I knew definitely, they should not leave my possession.

Finally they sent me in to a thin-faced elderly man, who was their Spanish teacher. I told him what I wanted and handed him the first sheet. He took it, looked it over intently, and then gazed up at me over the rims of his eyeglasses. In an interested tone he remarked:

"This is indeed unusual. I have never seen anything like it. It must be very old; the Spanish here employed is archaic."

"Never mind that," I objected. "Just go ahead and translate it." I was getting nervous.

"What about a copy? Do you wish one," he inquired, before making a start.

That was so. I did. I looked at the sheets I held. They were few; whatever the narrative they contained, it was of no great length.

"No use in bringing in a third person," I told him. "Translate slowly and I'll jot it down in longhand." If I found it important, I could see that he spoke slowly enough so that I could put down every word. If it was unpromising, then it mattered little whether I got it all or not.

He began. It did not, in its opening, lead me to expect anything of value. But as the reading went on, I guessed the truth and my hair began to rise. When he was done, fear had laid hold of my heartstrings. Larry Bowen, I told myself, it is only by the grace of God that you are alive this night. Of all the chances

you have taken! For I knew that now I held the true key to the two deaths.

The Spanish scholar recognized no connection between the message he had translated and the Oswald murder case. When he had done, I paid his fee, gathered up the sheets and my translation of them, and hurried out.

What to do? That was my problem. Should I hunt down Sullivan and read it to him? Even if I did, I'd have to read it again to the district attorney and to the coroner, and any number of others. I decided that it would be better to assemble those interested and place the message before them.

That must be done at once, the very next morning. For on the afternoon of that day, Tithes was to be buried. If I waited, it would have to go over for two days, at least, and I felt no inclination to hold off so important a communication that length of time.

The place in which it was most convenient to hold the meeting was the museum. As this was the scene of the crimes, it would be best. I stopped at a toll station, and after some difficulty got Isobel on the line. I told her that I had made a discovery which would clear up the mystery of her father's death, and that I'd like to call together all those interested the following morning, as early as convenient, in the museum; would she permit me to do so?

She was more than willing and at the prospect that the load of worry and anxiety oppressing her would be lifted from her shoulders, her voice took on a tone of cheerfulness, the first with which it had been charged since the death of Tithes. Abe, the coroner, Cum-

mings, and the others who had a right to be present, I summoned by phone, or had a message left for them if they were out. I then caught a car and went back to my rooms and to bed.

CHAPTER XIX.

“THE FANGS OF THE SERPENT.”

BY eight o'clock the next morning we were gathering in the museum. Our number was not great. While, literally, thousands were interested in the cause of the death of J. Marion Oswald, and while thousands of others were curious concerning the passing of Stitmore Tithes, few there were who were close enough to the case, either officially or through relationship to either of the deceased, to be entitled to be present at this time.

Isobel went up to the fourth floor on my arm, scouting all hints and requests on my part that she remain away and let me tell her about it afterward. As we passed the landing on which the lawyer's body had been found—could it have been but day before yesterday?—she quivered and drew more closely to me. This was the only nervousness or agitation she exhibited. Erect and with immobile countenance she entered the room where her father had died, her mien not incomparable to that we associate, however wrongfully, with royalty. A sufficiency of chairs had been provided by the servants and were arranged just north of the Hopi snake dance group, facing the chest as I had requested. Isobel chose a seat in the second row.

Just behind her were the two maids, Elsinore Trevecott and Annie O'Regan. I looked with curiosity at

the latter; never would I have suspected her of being the daughter of Mrs. Michael O'Regan, the medium known as Madame Giovanetti Blatavaratsky. The firm, strong lines I had noted in the mother's face, I failed to find reproduced in the daughter's.

Tasker, too, was in attendance. He looked older; deaths, such as these, weigh heavily on old people. Abe Sullivan I saw talking to the officer on guard; as we entered he left the man and come over to where I stood beside Isobel; he asked no questions.

I had likewise notified the coroner and he was present. There were also two men representing the various Oswald interests, and two legal gentlemen from the Tithes' side of the inquiry. Drs. Templeton and Thompson, with Reacon Mars and the chemist, James Haslette, completed the company with the exception of one group.

District Attorney Cummings had brought with him June Davis and Mrs. O'Regan. I was startled when I saw them present and started to call Isobel's attention to these ladies, then thought better of it. She recognized neither. They were quietly and tastefully dressed. June no longer wore the heavy black veil I had noted at the father's funeral. She met the curious eyes turned her way with a modesty and steadfastness that excited my admiration. After all, who has a better right to be present at an inquiry into a father's death than his daughter. I wondered if the two were still technically under arrest. Perhaps there was some other motive which induced Cummings to bring them himself. At a guess, I felt that he might not be at all sure that my solution of the mystery would prove cor-

rect and if not—well, it would be a stroke of genius to have some one present to accuse of the murder.

Isobel and I had been the last to arrive. We had waited until assured by Tasker that all expected were present. I did not delay in presenting my discovery.

It was but a few minutes after eight when I began. Taking a stand in front of the old chest, I addressed the assemblage without preliminary discussion.

“Through a bit of good fortune, I believe that I hold the key that will unlock the mystery of the deaths of Mr. Oswald and Mr. Tithes. I haven’t as yet tried this key. This action I have reserved for your presence. Yet so firmly do I hold that the solution I will offer is the correct one that I am willing to run the risk of a public failure.”

I took the discolored sheets from my pocket; then the translation.

“This is the key,” I remarked, holding up the sheets that all might see the few aged pages. No one said a word. Abe drummed heavily on the arm of his chair. Isobel, I thought, looked disappointed. I continued.

“It must seem strange to you that pages as old as these are—and they were written four hundred years ago—can have any connection with, and explain the death of a man as vitally modern and up-to-date as J. Marion Oswald. Yet it is an odd circumstance that a man, writing shortly after the discovery of America, can offer the correct explanation of how two men came to die in this room. First, as to where I found the papers. Notice how thin is this chest. The lid,—and the sides and bottom are the same,—do not exceed in any appreciable amount, two inches in thickness. Examine this point,” and I touched a section of the edge

of the lid four inches to the right of the hasp. "This small section of copper band is movable," and with a lift of the hand I slipped it up, and pointed to a narrow crevice between the boards.

"In this slit, which I stumbled upon,"—I might tell them where but had no intention of telling "how" unless necessity compelled—"were hidden these pages of manuscript. The message they contain is printed with a brush upon this 'paper,' which is not paper but a closely woven fabric. The message is of no great length. It is written in Spanish. As I am unacquainted with the language, I had a translation made, which with your permission I shall read to you."

Those present sat in silence, somewhat puzzled, to judge from their expressions. Yet once I began to read there were no interruptions until the end.

"I, Gonzalo Corcantera," I read, "write this message. I call down the vengeance of Heaven upon the heretics and unbelievers who have made me, a follower of the True God, the slave to their king. May the Blessed Virgin pardon my sins and strike dead these, mine enemies. To him into whose hands this writing may fall, I commend the taking of this kingdom. It is rich in gold and jewels. Sell the people into slavery; they are fit for naught else.

"It may be that I shall be dead when this is read. If so, beware of this the chest of the Serpent. Cast it into the sea without opening. But may it please God in His Omnipotence that aid comes while I live. If not, I have caused a saying to circulate among these people. This any man of my race will understand; it will guide him to this letter.

"I was born among the mountains of Castile nigh

unto Avila. By trade I am a metal worker and cabinet maker. I was yet a young man when word came to our city of the new way to the Indies found by the Italian, Christoforo, and of the great wealth that came to all who ventured. I was not moved. Not until years had flown and I saw the flood of gold that came into the land from the sacking of the great cities of the barbarians, was I minded to try my fortune.

"In the year of Our Lord, 1516, I betook myself to the south. At Cadiz I joined myself to the expedition of Anton de Vargas. We sailed within a week, seven great ships. After three weeks of western going, a great storm arose. Our vessel was blown far to the south. We found much ice and great cold. Nor could our captain tell where we were.

"We sailed north and found another storm. This blew us to the east and we saw a high coast where there should be no land. The waves and the wind abated not. We were driven against the rocks. The vessel broke like an eggshell. Some were crushed by the timbers. Others were hurled into the sea. I alone came to shore, living.

"A large group of the men of the country seized me. They were well-armed. We fared along the coast to a large town of many dwellings. In the tongue of these unbelievers it is Tumbrez.

"Here rested their great king, Huayna Capac. He had but returned from a successful war in the north. To him the men led me. He caused me to be taken before his vast army. Here he declared that I was his slave and attached to his court.

"For a year I have been his servant in all things. I have been constrained to perform tasks ill befitting one

of the race of Castile. Shortly he did find that I had skill in metal handling. He made me a worker in copper and bronze for his court.

"He talks much with me concerning the men of my race. Of late, runners have come out of the north. They bear tales of the wonderful deeds done in the heathen cities by the soldiers and servants of His Most Worshipful Majesty, King Ferdinand. Now the king holds a great fear of all men of our race. He says that we who carry the True Cross are thieves and murderers, that we would rob him of his nation, that all we care for is gold.

"Thus do I see that he distrusts me. My death may come shortly, when it suits his pleasure that I be stoned. Yet I die revenged. I have planned well. By my hand shall he die, even after I am dead. But he is tricky and fearful of me. Trickery I must meet with greater trickery or will he escape.

"Because of my wisdom and skill, he did call me 'The Serpent,' saying that I was wise in the devious ways of crawling things. As he called me 'The Serpent,' so be it. It shall be the Fangs of the Serpent that shall reach upward from the grave and smite him.

"For him I have made a chest, of wood and copper and bronze, even this wherein I hide this message. In this have I wrought many of the cunning devices known to the artisans of Castile. These they build into the treasure-chests of wealthy Castilian merchants.

"Yet the king is cunning. No simple trap may I set. I may not make the chest to kill each time. Never will he be caught with so simple a device. Many times must this box work safely. Yet at another time must it kill with certainty. Though many may die ere it

reach him, just so certainly as it is safe many times, so the hour shall come when he shall touch it and, in that touching, die.

“In front of this chest, beside the lock, I have made a cunning machine. This does operate as the lid is raised. When this is lifted, a rod with two teeth of bronze, fashioned like unto those of a serpent, darts forth. That he who is to die may be where the fangs can touch him, I placed the locks and the hasps in such wise that he who would open the chest must pull strongly up on the upper hasp while pushing with force on the lower lock. When the lid rises, the Fangs of the Serpent strike and bury themselves in him who is at the chest.

“I make these fangs with no safety catch. Were it set by me, then the chest would be harmless with no one by to set it for the king. Nor might it be left to act every time. It might chance that a slave would open it in his presence and in that opening die. Sees the king the working of the fangs and my revenge is lost.

“Therefore I devised a cunning wheel which does turn each time the lid is raised. When this has been lifted twenty-six times, the fangs are set to operate when next it is raised. Then not again do they work until the wheel turns round once more.

“Now an end is made to work on the chest. The fangs do operate most quickly. By these I have placed the gum that carries quick death. When they are drawn back into the recess, they rest against it. Each time they dart forth, they carry a load of poison. They return to their nest but to have it renewed. He whom they touch dies at once.

“I am done. Into the hands of the Virgin, I com-

mend myself. As it please the Great God, so goes my life. As it please him to answer my prayers, so shall the king, Huayna Capac, come to his death by my hands.

“To him who finds this message I pray, Peace be with you. Unto my wife who is in Villatoro, send information of me. My most earnest prayers are that you seize this land. Take its wealth and its heretical people. Burn them with fire, scourge them, rack them, that the True Faith may prevail in the land. When the last one is dead or a slave, then shall my prayers have been answered. My great wrongs shall be revenged. The Fangs of the Serpent rest, ready for vengeance. (Signed)

“Gonzalo Corcantera, The Serpent.”

A most lovable, Christian character, this old Gonzalo Corcantera! Hypocritical, savage, blind, like not a few I know. As I ceased the reading and laid down the last page of the translation, a concerted sigh arose from my auditors. I waited for no comments but continued.

“Now for a test of this story written by a long dead Spaniard. I shall need a little assistance. Mr. Sullivan—Thank you.”

I do not know whether Abe doubted the story or not; he came forward with alacrity. To him I handed a piece of stout rope. This we looped about the upper hasp so that Sullivan, standing behind the chest, could draw upward. I took a stick about the average dimensions of a cane. With it I attacked the lock. The audience craned forward in their chairs. Isobel gave a little call, but checked it almost before she cried out. For some moments we worked, pulling, jerking and pushing without the lid's moving. Then a strong thrust on my part

released the lock and the lid flew up with a jerk. Nothing happened. I closed it again, remarking:

"As we do not know the exact number of times this chest has been opened since Stitmore Tithes was struck, we must exercise caution, working it again and again. While twenty-seven was set down as the base number, we cannot know but what there is another factor. We may set it in action long before the twenty-seventh opening, or it may take several times twenty-seven before the fangs strike."

"One," counted Abe, as we prepared to try again. This unlatching took a much shorter time, for we had discovered the movements necessary to release the lock. no result. "Two," counted Abe, as he closed the lid again.

On, on, went the experiments; there was no lessening of the tension among us. No word was spoken save Sullivan in counting; no movements, save those we made in opening and closing the chest. "Ten," Abe counted, and still nothing to show. The lid made a great din, groaning and creaking as we operated it.

"Twenty," he announced, keyed nearly to the breaking point by now. For, if the story were true, there were seven, or less, more moves. Again we adjusted the rope and plied the stick. The lid rose, but as it did so——

Like a flash of light something darted from near the lower lock and struck the stick, hurling it from my hand. Snap, and it was back in its place, hidden from view and with a muffled bang the cover dropped of its own accord. But in the flash of movement, I saw that the arm was of bronze and moved with a sweep; at the end were two short, curved needles.

Abe straightened up and wiped the perspiration from his brow. I felt the reaction from the nervous strain, and dropped into a chair. A dull hum, unconsciously spoken thought, filled the room. It died away as I pulled myself to my feet.

"Thus Mr. Oswald met his death; and but two days ago, Stitmore Tithes fell a victim." I paused. Isobel was sobbing but I could not comfort her now. "It seems probable Mr. Oswald had been reading the letters he had concealed. It must have been then that the corner was torn from one of them and became caught in his clothes, to be found beneath him later. After turning the chest right side up, he must have opened it. If he was on his knees when the fangs struck, he was hurled backward by the force of the blow. It seems most probable that he rose to his feet and started for the stairs; the poison worked too quickly; he collapsed as he reached the end of the chest."

They followed my line of reasoning closely, glancing from point to point as I mentioned them.

"In the search for the supposed murderer of Mr. Oswald, or, more properly, this weapon, the chest was opened again and again—and I shiver when I think that I was one who opened it many times—yet not enough to work the mechanism while it was being investigated. For some reason known to himself, Stitmore Tithes went to the chest. His opening was the fatal twenty-seventh since Mr. Oswald opened it. He was struck and died."

Isobel had followed with closest attention. Now she threw in a puzzled question. I could feel the suppressed sob in her dear throat as she asked:

"But if he was struck in the way—father was, how was he found so far from the chest?"

"The probability lies in this explanation," and I looked at Dr. Templeton, for he had made the contention on the day Tithes' body was found. "Mr. Tithes was a much younger man than Mr. Oswald, and had much greater vitality. After he was struck he had time to take many steps before he dropped; always granting that the strength of the poison was the same. This might not be; with the passing of the centuries the gum would harden and each movement of the arm would wear a deeper groove in the curari, so that the fangs may receive but a minute quantity at the present time."

"Horrible, horrible," Isobel gasped. The lined faces of the others reflected the same thought. The coroner spoke up.

"Yes, Mr. Bowen, I believe you are right. But does any one know how many lives this murderous device has taken?"

I brought out the letter from James Orth and opening it, explained.

"This letter was yesterday brought to my attention by Mr. Mars. It is from Mr. Oswald's private files. It directed my attention to the chest. Permit me to read the pertinent part," and I gave them that portion that offered the key.

"So you see," I added, as I folded the letter and replaced it in my pocket, "that there are a number of deaths which in all probability were caused by the chest. There were five while it was in the possession of Jesus Quintanilla; also, the inference is that the seven skeletons about it in the cave were those of men who had opened it at various times in the centuries it

lay there. Add the two recent deaths and there are fourteen murders that Gonzalo Corcantera must answer for."

And if he killed the Inca, the number would be fifteen, computed Abe. I shook my head.

"If history does not state falsely, there the Spaniard failed. Huayna Capac died about a year after the chest was completed, but the record of the early conquerors of the Peruvian nation is that the great chieftain died a natural death. It might be inferred that the bones described by Orth as lying on the shelf in the cave were those of some favorite of the Inca to whom he gave the chest and with whom it was buried. And the bones of the Caucasian at the rear of the cave may have been the remains of Corcantera. It was an Inca custom for servants and underlings to die when the master did. Thus when the head of the Inca nation passed out, a large number of persons suffered death,—apparently willingly,—that he might not enter the other world without a large retinue. So, possibly, the Spaniard was sent with the chest and when the owner died he, too, was despatched. There is no evidence to show that the master was killed by the chest."

The mystery of the deaths was solved, but there were many minor points on which we could never hope for information. Often I wonder what was the saying Corcantera gave the people of the Incas that would reveal to another Spaniard the secret hiding place of his letter.

The odd nature of the curari was no longer a problem. As that now known to science comes from the northern part of South America, any prepared four hundred years ago, and as far south as Peru, would be

much different from the modern poison. This would account for Jimmy Haslette's puzzlement.

It was Sullivan who now put to me a question I had hoped would not be asked.

“How did you happen to find that crevice with the papers? It was so well hidden that it escaped the search of you and me, as well as Dr. Herron, all the times we went over it.”

I hesitated before replying. Should I invent a plausible explanation, or should I tell the whole truth? I decided on the latter course.

“It was through no efforts of my own.” I faced and addressed them all. “In our early investigation of Mr. Oswald's death, we came upon what seemed manifestations of the occult, forces beyond those of this world. These supernormal phenomena we traced to an earthly origin.”

I smiled apologetically. I had no desire to call attention to the mediums nor to Isobel, who had been deceived by them.

“I now have to call your attention to an experience of the same sort that happened to me. I found those papers by supernormal assistance. I was here in the museum alone. There was no person on this floor. The officer on guard had gone out for the evening meal. I had come here because I felt that the secret of the deaths lay among these collections; and I now had something pointing directly to the chest, the letter of James Orth.

“As I stood before this old box made by Corcantera so long ago, a feeling of fear stole over me. The longer I studied the copperbound exterior, the more I disliked to touch the thing. If his story was true, what

might not happen to me? And then—there came to my ears a faint ‘tap—tap,’ with a pause followed by a quick ‘tp.’ I thought my sense of hearing was deceiving me. I must have imagined it. I listened a moment. After quite an interval it came: ‘tap—tap, tp.’ At once it recurred to me that this was the signal Mr. Oswald used in calling Deborah. Again I heard it. Who was signaling? Whence came it? Other than Miss Oswald, Detective Sullivan, Dr. Herron and myself, the only two who knew of his making use of this call were in custody. All these I at once dismissed from consideration; they would have no motive in sounding it. Then who could it be? Again came the taps, faint yet distinct: ‘M. E.’, ‘M. E.’

“In my surprise and agitation at recognizing the call, I had failed to note from whence it came. It seemed to be in the air all about me. But now I listened with a purpose; if it sounded again, I would note just where it was. The muffled taps struck my ear drums again; I grasped that it came from the direction of the hall. At once I felt that some one was in the hall tapping on the separating partition, and rushed round to the door. The hall was empty; but the tapping did not cease. Even as I stood in the doorway, I sensed it again. Now it was back on the other side of the wall. After several false moves I at length localized it in the chest.

“My hair stood up straight. Was there some one in the thing? I want to say that never have I attempted a task with more reluctance than I did the raising of this lid. I had to force myself up to the lock and, as I grasped it, I had such terror of operating it that I almost gave up. Even as I touched it, the raps were

repeated. I kept thinking that at my next move I would feel the prick of the points, but finally I raised the lid and leaped back. A useless precaution; the box was empty.

“Yet, even while the lid stood raised the tapping was renewed. It was uncanny, standing beside an open chest and hearing an intelligence out of the nowhere communicating by taps on a box. But was it a communication? I listened very closely to the next series and detected that they came from a point on the edge of the lid, and there I found the strip of copper that was movable. After I moved that band, the taps never came again. I had found the papers.

“Simple, certainly, but what a problem it leaves! Who was signaling to me? And why to me? Was it the intelligence we call Mr. Oswald? He knew the chest had killed him, but during his life was he aware of the secret of the hiding place? He it was who used the ‘M. E.’ call. Or was it Gonzalo Corcantera? He was familiar with the hiding place of his message, and of the terrible weapon hidden in the box. But did he know the signal ‘M. E.’? If he did, where did he obtain the knowledge? Or might it not have been Marian Ellarson, she who was the ‘M. E.’ called by the signals? She could not have known of the chest, the concealed letter, or the deaths; unless—— Or were all three signaling? Or do all our intelligences flow back to a central reservoir of intelligence, all knowing, which communicated the knowledge? Or—but think of the possibilities which lie in the problem, who was it?”

As I ceased talking, Abe didn’t smile as I thought he would. He knew I was telling what I believed to be the truth. Judging from their faces, of all those

present Mrs. O'Regan obtained the most satisfaction from my recital.

When I had finished, and before any one could put in a question, District Attorney Cummings came forward and stood beside me.

"At this time," he said, addressing the guests, "I bring before you another matter of much importance in this case. Miss Isobel Oswald has been recognized as the legal heir to her father's estate, under a will made ten years ago. I have now to announce the discovery of a later testament, one executed and witnessed two years back."

When I had found that he did not want me, I took a seat at Isobel's side. Cummings took from his pocket, as he spoke of the later document, the envelope which I recognized from Sullivan's description, as that found upon Stitmore Tithes. But if this was the will, what was Tithes doing with it? True, as Mr. Oswald's lawyer, it should have been in his custody. If so, why had he not produced it long before? Drawing the will from the cover, the attorney opened it and with a few words of explanation began.

"This document is far different from that under which Miss Isobel Oswald was given the whole estate. The affair is unusual, but as all interested are here assembled, I deem it best to read it at this time."

What, I thought, is Isobel to be disinherited? And then my heart bounded with elation. If she lost her wealth the one last bar between us would be broken and I could offer such devotion as few, in their wildest dreams, dare tender. There was no time for more thoughts; the district attorney was reading.

The opening details were non-essential and the main

clauses that came later contained many explanations, far from usual in such an instrument. After several generous bequests to servants and personal employees, the will stated:

“To my daughter Isobel I hereby give, devise and bequeath an undivided one-half interest in the residue of my estate.”

Cummings looked at Isobel. Oh, I gasped, she does get something, one-half. Selfishly, I had hoped she would receive nothing that I might offer her my life in its stead; for her sake, I tried to be glad. After the brief glance he resumed the reading.

“To my other child, born over a year before Isobel, if it be living at the time of my death, I give the other one-half. I know not when this child was born, other than the year, nor where it may now be. My executors are hereby instructed to use every means of discovering this, my second heir.

“To assist them in their search I give such details as I deem pertinent. In 18— I spent some months in Two Rocks, Wisconsin, tracing the very considerable sums of money which disappeared from our branch plant at that point. Through the assistance of the manager, who suspected the culprit, I obtained proof that resulted in his conviction. It was while here that I fell in love with Marian Ellarson. Some years later I married her under the name of Davis, by which she knew me.

“Thus in the eyes of the law, and by the unnatural standards of modern morality, it was a polygamous marriage. Yet by Biblical teachings and by the hereditary inclinations of men of our race, it is right and proper. This is not an excuse. I did right. For

I loved her, even as I loved her whom the law regards as my legal wife.

"Yet circumstance prevented me from seeing Marian Ellarson often. And in 18— I was forced to take Mrs. Oswald on a world tour, which lasted much over a year. On my return, I was for many months in a hospital. When I recovered and visited Bellefontaine where I had established Mrs. Davis, I could find no trace of her. Here I learned for the first time that a child had been born, but both mother and baby had disappeared and I have had no word of either to this day.

"A year ago there came to me letters which showed either that Mrs. Davis was alive, or that some one was in possession of our secret. In my first fears I destroyed the marriage certificate which proved me guilty of legal bigamy."

Some one gave a great sob, a suspiration not only of sorrow, but of relief, even joy. I did not look around. I knew it was June, happy because her mother had been wedded, even though the ceremony was a bigamous one.

"The letters revived the old sorrow. I knew that I longed with all my being to see Marian again. To make restitution? No; to tell her that I loved her. I now know that she is dead. For she has come back to me from the realm of shadows and brought me the long-desired peace of mind. I have looked into her face again and soon shall be with her for eternity."

In the face of June, his daughter, he had seen, not his own features, but only the countenance of his lost loved one.

"But she has told me that the child lives, though whether boy or girl I know not. Nor do I know its

name, though doubtless Davis would be its surname. Here, again, I enjoin my executors to search and find this child and give to it its rightful share of my estate.”

Cummings read a few more directions which Mr. Oswald had set down, and then turned to June Davis Oswald with words of advice.

“Miss June Davis, prove to the court that you are the daughter of Marian Ellarson Davis and you share equally in the estate with your sister, Miss Isobel,” and he looked at my beloved.

The dear girl had risen to her feet. Her face was white and I feared she was about to faint. For once she had forgotten me. This was the first that she had known that she had a sister in the room. Isobel turned toward June and, as she did so, her face flushed and her eyes filled with tears. Half extending her arms, in halting words she addressed June.

“I—never had—a sister—and I wanted one—always——Will you—will you—” with tear-dimmed eyes and quivering lips, June Davis took my Isobel into her arms.

We men went out into the little hall at the head of the stairs and left the three women alone.

As we stood, some one referred to the fact that Tithes had the will. We shall never know just what the reason was for its not being produced. He must have known of its existence, even if he did not have it in his possession. Did he deliberately suppress it, hoping to marry Isobel and secure the entire fortune? If Mr. Oswald had told any one, Stitmore Tithes would have been that one; he would have known of the child. But if he had the will, why had he not destroyed it?

The inhibition acquired by attorneys to make way with legal papers, argued Cummings, who believed in Tithes' guilt.

But I must be just. It might be that on that very day he had found the will and was bringing it to Isobel. Perhaps, though I doubt it, he found it in a hiding place in Corcantera's murder machine.

Later, when the discussion became general, Sullivan told me of the results of the inquiry into the story told by June Davis, the end of which I missed. I had failed to grasp one point that had occurred at the materialization; the cloud of vapor floating in the air of Mr. Oswald's chamber. It hardly could have been a dematerializing spirit. Yet I had seen it.

It really was vapor, nothing but vapor. June, in the corner cupboard, and partly through the sliding panel, concealed by her dark garment which had been turned immediately I made a move, sprayed water into the air. The light from the street lamp, angling in through the window, rendered a part of it visible for a brief space. As we gathered in the museum, preparatory to departing, Abe ventured a comment.

"After all, the Fangs of the Serpent did kill Mr. Oswald. A queer coincidence, I call it, that he should have been concerned with the fangs of another Serpent. It was that which misled us. Queer, queer."

"And father was not the horrible character that man Marsh tried to make out"; Isobel was quick to defend her father's memory. "Father thought him guilty. He says so."

And yet—who can give back to Lionel Marsh the years he lost? and the love that was taken from him? How should I feel were I, innocent, to be cast into

prison, and lose Isobel? Poor old cripple! I cannot blame him for his bitter hatred. Life did its worst to him. Why should he not be bitter?

The Oswald case is done. From the point of view of the press it was a sensation. How the American News gloated: “Our Reporter Solves the Mystery,” and the rest. The complete story was told, but with many phases barely touched upon, especially the acts of June Davis and of Mrs. O’Regan.

Technically Mrs. O’Regan had committed a crime in making and having in her possession keys to the Oswald home. Both she and June were guilty of entering the house in the night time. But this is forgotten. June cannot be prosecuted and she would not permit her foster mother, who did it only for June’s sake, to be held accountable for these acts.

Isobel ordered the chest destroyed; every lock, bolt, nut, and hinge must go. I protested, declaring that it could be rendered harmless and that as an historical relic it was of great value. But this time my arguments were of no avail. I later learned that the police had obtained possession of the bronze arm and fangs, though how they secured it I do not know. However, of this Isobel knows nothing.

I often get to thinking of my prophecy of how the murderer would look. “He would be a well-educated man—He would be wealthy—He would not be a very young man, nor yet very old.” I certainly missed on the first two counts, though doubtless Gonzalo Corcatera was of about the age I imagined.

Yet it is rather far-fetched to consider a man four hundred years dead as a modern assassin. All the wild

theories I had entertained in regard to Mr. Oswald's death were now at rest. It had been no murder, such as we call murder; it was but an act of God through a revengeful Spaniard of the early Sixteenth Century. Could Corcantera look down upon us and see the happenings of this day, what must he think!

Isobel and I are soon to be married. And Sullivan, the gruff, wishes us every success. To me, knowing Abe, this means much. He will be one of the honored guests—June and her mother will be there, of course—and another will be Dr. Cyrus Herron.

Herron stopped off in Chicago some days ago while on a trip west and I told him of my finding the Corcantera papers by the taps which sounded "M. E." We went over the possible explanations I outlined at the gathering in the museum. He suggested a new one.

"You may have heard the tappings mentally, while physically they never existed. This hypothesis must be considered."

I doubted. This explanation was too far-fetched. He made plain his meaning.

"You had been working and studying on the mystery of the two deaths until your mental states, both conscious and subconscious, were saturated with it. It is not improbable that in going over the chest, at some time, you subconsciously noted the movable copper band, while consciously it escaped your attention."

I admitted that this *might* be true.

"Being there alone, and with conditions favorable—perhaps you entered a trancelike state—the subconscious mind took control. The taps that formed 'M. E.' had made a very deep impression on you. Therefore what more natural than for your unrecognized mental

apparatus to make use of this as a certain method of bringing to your attention the hiding place, thus lifting the knowledge from the subconscious into the conscious.”

It may be true. Dr. Herron should know. But—somehow, I prefer to think that off there in the great unknown beyond the sea of death, there is an intelligence, all-knowing, all-loving, that called back to save those who were beloved, June and my Isobel.

THE END

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